



Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute
Instituto Smithsonian de Investigaciones Tropicales

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A new Smithsonian guide to the highly biodiverse marine environment of Panama's Bocas del Toro Province

Coral reefs, coastal rainforest, land-grab, industrial bananas and organic cacao, mangroves, tourist boom, eclectic cultural mix: A *Caribbean Journal of Science* special issue presents the first scientific overview of the marine environment in Bocas del Toro Province near Panama's border with Costa Rica. With color photographic guide to marine invertebrates--the volume, edited by Dr. Rachel Collin, director STRI's research station in Bocas--debuts new species and new records for Panama and provides an essential reference for researchers, tourists and conservationists throughout the region.

"The known diversity in Bocas looks very good in comparison with other places in the Caribbean" explains Collin. "Sponges and some brittlestars are much more abundant on reefs here, and after only ten days of snorkel sampling, Bocas has already become the most diverse site for Nemertean (unsegmented marine worms) and the second most diverse site for tunicates. Diversity is expected to increase with more intensive sampling." Collin found funds from the Smithsonian Marine Science Network and the Smithsonian Women's Committee to invite a host of experts on different taxonomic groups to conduct marine surveys in 2003 and 2004, and to set up a baseline species inventory for the station.

Collin encourages interested researchers to contact STRI: "I hope that scientists and students will find the organisms they work with in our online database and decide to visit the station. We already have documented more than 3000 species." (see links)

Comparable to Dan Janzen's *Natural History of Costa Rica* or Egbert Leigh's *The Ecology of a Tropical Forest*, the book-length CJS volume provides a geographic, geological and environmental context for the station and sets the stage for future work in the region. Focusing in like a pirate's spyglass, initial chapters describe Bocas del Toro's geology, physical environmental monitoring program, and salt- water communities. Later chapters present two new species of brittle star, three new species of *Micura* worms and overviews of sponges, hydroids, sea squirts, black corals, soft corals, porcellanid crabs and peanut worms.

In 2003 STRI inaugurated a new, award-winning, low-impact laboratory in Bocas (see links). In addition to providing a state-of-the-art seawater system that makes it possible to conduct experiments requiring living marine organisms, the station is now base camp for surveys of

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nearby reefs, seagrass beds and mangroves, as part of CARICOMP, a Caribbean-wide monitoring program that STRI has participated in since 1999.

Collin hopes that people will take advantage of the free, online guide: “Many of the same animals also live in other parts of the Caribbean. The online guide provides a service for the entire region.”

STRI Director, Dr. Ira Rubinoff, placed conservation of marine and terrestrial ecosystems in Bocas high on STRI’s priority list for 2006: “It is critical that homeowners, divers, retirees, investors, sports fishermen, tourists--all of the different interests in Bocas del Toro--realize that they depend upon and benefit from the sustainable management of natural beauty and biodiversity.”

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The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), a unit of the Smithsonian Institution, with headquarters in Panama City, Panama, was established to further our understanding of tropical nature and its importance to human welfare, to train students to conduct research in the tropics and to promote conservation by increasing public awareness of the beauty and importance of tropical ecosystems. www.stri.org

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Additional links:

- Bocas marine biodiversity data base: http://striweb.si.edu/bocas_database
- STRI Environmental Science Program (environmental monitoring): <http://striweb.si.edu/esp/>
- Laboratory building: <http://femp.buildinggreen.com/overview.cfm?ProjectID=263>
- Caribbean Coastal Marine Productivity Program (CARICOMP): http://www.ccdc.org.jm/caricomp_main.html
- Panama Paleontology Project : <http://www.fiu.edu/~collinsl/pppimagemapnew.htm>
- Yale-UCSD Coral Bleaching Project <http://pantheon.yale.edu/%7Eob36/corals.html>

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