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Smithsonian Works with Embera Community to Offset Carbon Emissions

Thanks to a collaborative agreement signed between the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute and the Organization for Unity and Development of the Community Ipeti-Embera, the Institute in Panama will offset its estimated carbon emissions for the next three years.

The Traditional Directorship of the General Congress of Alto Bayano, officials from Panama's National Environmental Authority, representatives of the environmental organization ANCON, staff and students from Canada's McGill University and the signing organizations celebrated the agreement in Ipeti on Aug. 17, 2008.

In addition to developing new energy-saving practices and an education program for its employees, the Institute will offset its carbon dioxide output by purchasing emission reduction credits from the Embera community.

The agreement aims at sequestering additional carbon dioxide over the next 25 years through plantations established with native tree species and avoiding the release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere by conserving forested land. Proceeds from the carbon purchase will support the families directly participating in the implementation and create a fund to benefit all community members.

Catherine Potvin, McGill University professor, research associate at the Smithsonian and advisor to Panama's National Environmental Authority, has worked closely with the Embera community in Ipeti, seeking a way to simultaneously protect the forest, its biodiversity and carbon stock while improving livelihoods and maintaining cultural integrity.

"This Smithsonian contribution to mitigating greenhouse gas emissions is a direct result of Catherine Potvin's foresight in adapting her studies of plant carbon uptake to Panama's cultural and economic reality and represents a very positive step in support of our basic research on the impact of global change on tropical forests and water availability and the HSBC Climate Partnership with the World Wildlife Fund, Earthwatch and the Climate Group," said Eldredge Bermingham, director of the institute.

"I hope that our model for community-based carbon offset will show that the carbon market can directly benefit local people while helping Panama to remain an international leader in the global effort to

reduce emissions from deforestation under the United Nations' Framework Convention for Climate Change," said Potvin.

Omaira Casama—the former cacique and first woman to hold that position, the highest authority in the General Congress—helped to craft this project over the past four years: “As the community replants deforested areas with native species, we replant traditions vital to the conservation of our way of life. This is a very positive step toward confronting the ongoing devastation of natural resources and protecting the environment in the region.” She thanks the technical team and current cacique, Bolivar Jaripio.

“The Ipeti pilot project, if conducted in compliance with all of the regulations required by international carbon credit markets and local legislation, will be our focus as we develop national standards and propose future projects in the context of the World Bank’s Forest Carbon Partnership Facility pilot activities,” said Eduardo Reyes, of Panama’s Environmental Authority, ANAM. Panama has recently been chosen by the World Bank as one of 14 pilot countries to spearhead the reduction of emissions resulting from deforestation and forest degradation.

The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, headquartered in Panama City, Panama, is a unit of the Smithsonian Institution. The institute furthers the understanding of tropical nature and its importance to human welfare, trains students to conduct research in the tropics and promotes conservation by increasing public awareness of the beauty and importance of tropical ecosystems. For more information, visit www.stri.org.

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Additional background information:

In 2007, HSBC included the Smithsonian in the HSBC Climate Partnership, providing support for a major experiment to study the effects of reforestation in the Panama Canal watershed and to develop a set of forest monitoring sites: the Global Earth Observatory system. The HSBC Climate Partnership encourages its Partners to become carbon neutral.

An external audit of the institute’s carbon emissions by the Edinburgh Center for Carbon Management estimated that it produces about 4,000 tons of CO₂-equivalent emissions per year based on data from 2004-2006. The Smithsonian is taking its first major step toward offsetting carbon emissions.

Photo by Marcos Guerra, STRI: Bonarge Pacheco, member of the technical committee of the Traditional Directorship of the General Congress of Alto Bayano; Jeremía Casarí, the vice president of the Organization for Unity and Development of the Community Ipeti-Embera; and Eldredge Bermingham, director of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute.