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January 9, 2015

**Media website:** [http://www.stri.si.edu/english/about\\_stri/media/press\\_releases/index.php](http://www.stri.si.edu/english/about_stri/media/press_releases/index.php)

## **Smithsonian Research Supports Panama's New Marine Protected Areas Proposal**

Two extensive, unexplored submarine mountain chains are proposed as new open-water marine protected areas by the Republic of Panama based on scientific expertise from the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI). Submarine mountain chains are recognized by the United Nations as conservation priorities. The MPA's would dramatically increase Panama's total marine protected area from 3.54 percent to almost 12 percent and would safeguard a number of highly migratory species including whales and whale sharks, dolphins and turtles, and also species of commercial value like tuna and billfishes.

"This is a major step forward for regional marine conservation and is an example of how, with their dedication, passion & tenacity, our Smithsonian scientists provide the critically needed science that informs governmental policy," said Matthew Larsen, STRI Director.

Maps of the two proposed areas were unveiled at Smithsonian headquarters in Panama on Tues., Dec. 16 by Panama's National Environmental Authority, ANAM, during the second phase of a process to solicit public commentary. The National Director of Protected Areas and Wildlife, Zuleika Pinzón, said that this is a very significant initiative for marine conservation in Panama and for the National Protected Areas System that will also allow Panama to fulfill one of the Aichi Targets of the United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity. She said that ANAM is very pleased that key stakeholders are supporting this proposal.

In a previous meeting, ANAM convened other agencies responsible for environmental, economic and social processes in the target areas to solicit feedback. After taking additional information into consideration, the next step in the process would be for the Authority to issue a decree establishing the areas for signature by the President of the Republic.

Countries around the world are establishing marine protected areas. Roughly 6,500 MPAs exist to date, but they protect a mere 2.09 percent of the world's oceans. Currently only 0.26 percent of Panama's Caribbean waters and 3.28 percent of its Pacific waters are protected. By adding 2,797,360 hectares of marine protected area, Panama would comply with the United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity, Aichi Target 11, which calls for at least 10 percent of the country's marine area to be protected by 2020. With the establishment of these two areas, Panama would achieve this goal 5-6 years before the target date.

"The Fishing Sector is willing to work on the sustainability of resources and believes in the coexistence of fisheries, tourism and research. We know the importance of MPA's for the permanence of species and support any initiative aimed at the good of the majority. Their success will depend on the extent that there is a continuing dialog among stakeholders," said Marvin Correa, Executive Director of the National Association of the Fisheries Industry of Panama (ANDELAIPP).

Beginning in early 2012, the Smithsonian's Juan Maté, Manager of Scientific Affairs and Operations and staff scientist, Hector Guzmán, worked with Panamanian authorities to create the proposal for the new protected areas..

"We were asked to take the intellectual lead in drafting proposals that would link large coastal, deep-ocean and undersea mountain habitats to maximize the conservation value of each area," said Guzmán. "As we worked with officials to draft a proposal, we held five public meetings," said Maté. "We heard feedback representing a broad range of parties: from fishermen to conservationists."

In the Caribbean, the proposed *Banco Volcán* is located over a submarine volcanic mountain chain 50 to 3,500 meters in depth, offshore of Colón province. The proposed Pacific MPA, *Cordillera de Coiba*, is located South of Coiba National Park, over a submarine mountain chain 400 to 3,000 meters in depth. This area would protect submarine ridges extending from Coiba National Park and UNESCO Natural Heritage Site to the edge of Panama's Exclusive Economic Zone, EEZ. The Pacific MPA could eventually become the first bi-national Marine Protected Area in Panama if Colombia's Malpelo Flora and Fauna Marine Sanctuary were extended to the edge of the Colombian EEZ.

“The establishment of these two large MPA’s will provide important capacity-building opportunities for marine biology students in Panama and, at the same time, promote environmental tourism,” said Maté, “by fostering an environmentally friendly image.”

At the public forum, questions centered upon the feasibility of monitoring and enforcing the protected status of offshore, deep-water marine resources. The government of Panama uses a satellite-based platform to monitor the location of ships as they proceed through the Panama Canal and to determine the locations of fishing vessels in territorial waters. Government officials hope to use this system to monitor vessel activities in the protected areas.

At the presentation, Guzman outlined a work plan including finalization of the locations. He emphasized the need for research, monitoring and enforcement to ensure effective protection.

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.

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