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Smithsonian Launches Bocas del Toro Database for Biodiversity Day

The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute celebrates Biodiversity Day on May 22, 2008 with the launch of a new and improved data base for the Bocas del Toro region of western Panama. The Web site will showcase the amazing biodiversity in this area of Panama with descriptions of more than 3,000 individual species, many illustrated with photos. The site will make it easy for researchers, educators and tourists throughout the Caribbean to identify common land and marine organisms.

“This is one of the few databases on the Web that describes such a broad range of organisms, from simple, one-celled organisms to fish, birds and mammals,” said Steve Paton, director of the Institute’s Bioinformatics Office and designer of the system. “The database is designed to draw information from our growing collection of photographs and will eventually also include audio and video recordings.”

On Saturday, May 24, the Smithsonian’s Bocas del Toro Research Station will host students from the University of Panama and the Rogelio Josué Ibarra School for a day of hands-on activities to highlight the biodiverse environment of the station and key biodiversity concepts.

Rachel Collin, station director, invites suggestions for improving the system and encourages researchers who have collected in the area to submit lists and photos for groups that are still not represented. “We hope that tourists and developers in the region will realize that Bocas del Toro’s biodiversity is its biggest attraction. In 2007, we hosted more than 300 international researchers at the station and 30 scientific papers were published. We hope to keep growing and to develop new tools like the database to make our results widely available.”

Biodiversity Day was first celebrated on December 29, 1993, marking the signing of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. The date of the event was formally changed to May 22 in 2000 to encourage its celebration. The convention recognizes that biodiversity is about more than plants, animals and microorganisms—it is about people and their need for food security, medicines, fresh air and water, shelter and a clean and healthy environment in which to live.

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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Related links:

Bocas del Toro Biodiversity Data Base: http://biogeodb.stri.si.edu/bocas_database//

Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute: <http://www.stri.org/>

Photos and captions:

HawksbillTurtle.jpg, credit: Marcos Guerra, STRI