

CENTROAMÉRICA: Biodiversidad para el desarrollo

Bulletin No. 1 • Quarterly publication • June 2007

Introduction

Information about the plants of Central America to serve society

The Central American region houses 7% of the world's biodiversity, but to a large extent, knowledge about this biodiversity and its uses does not reach the population, much of which is immersed in poverty. Thanks to an agreement between the National Biodiversity Institute (INBio) and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), information about Central American plants is being integrated into a single regional network and converted into products that aid the development and adoption of socio-environmental policies that will benefit the population of these countries.



An initiative called "*Developing capacities and sharing technologies for biodiversity management in Central America*" aims to consolidate the region's network of herbariums, promoting the application of the knowledge generated in economic, social, environmental and cultural fields and enhancing plant conservation and appreciation. The project is based on the premise that Central America's natural richness is one of the region's most valuable resources for helping to improve the people's living conditions.

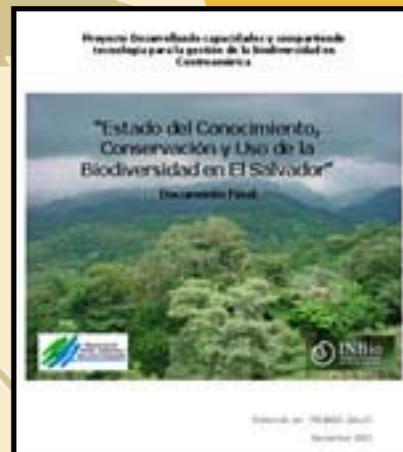
The project began in November 2003 and will be implemented through the end of 2009, at a cost of US\$4.3 million. Institutions participating since the beginning are the University of Panama, the Ministry of Natural Resources of Belize, the Natural History Museum of El Salvador, the National Museum of Costa Rica, the Pan-American Agricultural School (Zamorano) of Honduras, the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (León headquarters) and the Center for Conservation Studies of the University of San Carlos of Guatemala. The Central American University of Nicaragua, the National Autonomous University of Honduras and the University of Costa Rica joined the project later.

Some achievements

Information about biodiversity with a regional dimension

One of the first achievements of the project is having gathered all the information about the status of the knowledge of biodiversity for each one of the Central American nations, in a joint effort with national authorities. It also has country-by-country information on the conservation status of vertebrate and plant species that are threatened or endangered, included on Red Lists, or subjected to illegal trade.

At the last meeting of the technical and biodiversity committees of the Central American Commission for Environment and Development (CCAD) in San Salvador in January 2007, INBio was asked to integrate all the information gathered thus far so that the region would have a baseline for launching operations of the Strategic Regional Program for Biodiversity Monitoring and Evaluation (PROMEBIO).



Conservation status of the Central American flora

Preliminary information-gathering led to the conclusion that the region has 3,257 species of plants that are threatened in at least one of the countries, 524 species that are on the IUCN Red List and 1,276 species subjected to illegal trafficking and included in the Convention in International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

In the coming years, these data will be analyzed in light of the increasing amount of information compiled on the species and the sites where they are reported.

Human resource development in botany



The project has facilitated resources for equipment and the physical and technological infrastructure for seven herbariums of the region and their personnel, and also made it possible to hire 17 people to support the herbariums' activities; they represent a new generation of botanists.

The main objective of these people, in addition to their own training, is to help update the work pending in the herbariums including mounting specimens, curation and digitalizing information. They also develop products that address identified needs for information in their countries or in the region.

A project that fosters regional integration

This project has not only made greater integration of the herbariums in each country possible, it has also stimulated new initiatives and alliances with other herbariums and regional organizations, as in the cases of the CCAD and the Regional Biodiversity Institute (IRBio). Complementary relations and alliances with regional actors have been identified. This has led to a true integration process that is sustainable.

For more information

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Credits

Production: Project "Developing capacities and sharing technology for biodiversity management in Central America", INBio-Government of Norway.

Editing: Katiana Murillo, Diana Avila

Design and layout: Leila Calderon (INBio)

Activities underway

Plants of Central America only a *click* away

Thanks to the integration and digitalization of data on the flora of each country, very soon it will be possible to have information on a million Central American plant specimens. The portal will be on-line in May 2007 at:



http://www.inbio.ac.cr/web_herbarios and it will be expanded with data from each country during the project. The technical personnel of the participating herbariums have been properly trained to manage the database, including tools like Global Positioning System (GPS) technology and the preparation of digital maps, which will help put information about species distributions into the hands of users.

Publications popularize knowledge about plants of the region

Preparing publications aimed at the region's general public is one of the project's principal objectives. At present, the systematization of the information on the uses and distribution of at least 100 native edible plants of Central America is being finalized for publication this year and distribution to rural development agencies and projects in the countries.



Another three books are being readied for publication: Weeds of Nicaragua, Trees and shrubs of the City of León (Nicaragua) and Trees in the dry season (Costa Rica). Information is also being systematized on the toxic plants of Guatemala and 30 traditionally used plants in Panama.