
BIOPAMA and The Nature Conservancy organize three-day Scientific Forum in St. Lucia

By Gabriela Díaz Musmanni

More than forty representatives from thirteen Caribbean nations including Jamaica, Bahamas, Barbados, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti, Belize, and Guyana and the independent member states of the OECS gathered in St. Lucia from February 19 – 21 to take steps to support better decision making to protect and restore the region's marine and coastal environment, parks and protected areas.

The three-day scientific forum "Developing a Shared Vision for Improving Access to Information for Protected Area Management" was hosted by the Biodiversity and Protected Area Management Programme (BIOPAMA) and The Nature Conservancy's Eastern Caribbean Marine Managed Areas Network (ECMMAN) project. Country representatives shared their information, data collection and sharing needs and their ideas for utilizing the best information in making management decisions regarding both communities and the environment that supports them.

The participants' input during the forum will be used to build an effective and user-friendly platform or observatory, for collection, analysis and information and data sharing along with tools and capacity building to ensure the system will be used in decision making and management for a long time to come.

"This meeting was of the utmost importance for IUCN because it dealt with topics that are at the roots of BIOPAMA. This program is designed to enhance the capacity of people responsible for managing protected areas in the Caribbean countries. In addition, the program is going to set up an office to aggregate and facilitate information relevant for protected area management in the Caribbean," said co-organizer José Courrau, Senior Advisor on Protected Areas at IUCN's regional office for Mesoamerica.

"The observatory, as we call this office, is going to be located in an existing institution in the Caribbean and will initiate its work within the next six months. The participants at this meeting are providing key information for the work of the observatory and will remain engaged in the implementation of this initiative," added Courrau.

"The Nature Conservancy decided to co-host this workshop with IUCN because our efforts to collect, analyze, map and share data in the Caribbean have spanned the past decade, and our ongoing interest is to ensure that the best possible information can be used in decision making." said co-organizer Ruth Blyther, Director of TNC's Eastern Caribbean program. "The ECMMAN project is working to ensure that management decisions such as how we can reduce risks of disasters from changing climate, where we should site new coastal developments, or how we can ensure coral reefs and mangroves continue to provide for fisheries production are being supported with the best possible information available."

The participants at the forum ended the three-day event by determining key steps towards developing the BIOPAMA Observatory and decision-support tools, using the funds and resources provided via IUCN and TNC, and other regional initiatives. In addition, all of the regional organizations repeated their commitments to collaborate in the ongoing effort to ensure the countries' capacity to access and share data for better decision making and eventually improved management of our marine environment for the benefit of all.