



Coastal and Marine Conservation in Latin America and the Caribbean: Evaluation of Opportunities and Challenges

Executive Summary

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is designing a new regional biodiversity conservation program within the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) Region that aims to conserve coastal and marine biodiversity while improving economic opportunities for people living in coastal areas. The new program will have as its strategic focus the region's globally important but increasingly threatened coastal and marine biodiversity and related ecosystem services.

The decision to focus the new regional biodiversity conservation program on the coastal and marine realm is well-timed, given the challenges facing coastal communities and decision makers in the region. The program is expected to operate for two to five years, with a USAID investment of about \$3 million per year. For the whole program to be more than the sum of its project parts, the coastal and marine biodiversity conservation initiative must be highly strategic, especially given the constraints imposed by the program's extremely modest budget and compressed timelines. The challenge USAID faces is to design a regional initiative that can generate meaningful results, while recognizing that sustainability and measurable impact rest on stakeholder vision, commitment, and ownership—in other words, on demand-driven action at the level of individual sites.

This report summarizes opportunities and needs for using USAID funding to spur effective coastal and marine conservation in key areas within the LAC region. The findings are based on region-wide analyses of known patterns of biodiversity; threats to biodiversity; areas of high risk for loss of biodiversity; existing parks and, where known, their efficacy; socioeconomic information; and issues having policy implications. In addition a broad array of people in the region or familiar with the region were interviewed for their perspectives on conservation priorities and feasibilities.

The coastal systems of the LAC region are crucially important to people and are under ever-increasing threat from activities within and outside the coastal zone. Major threats to the region's coastal and marine biodiversity and ecosystem services include habitat transformations (on land and in the sea), overexploitation of resources, pollution and other inputs (much of it originating on land high in watersheds), and climate change and other event-related changes. These biophysical threats are driven by a number of social, political, and economic factors. Weak governance is a major driver of biodiversity degradation in the region; well established and legitimate institutional capacity is essential for the enforcement of regulations and for overall conservation and sustainable development.

The LAC region displays an enormous range of social conditions: Neither socioeconomic nor sociopolitics is uniform from country to country, or even within countries. Poverty is widespread in all subregions. Over 42% of the region's 222 million people are poor; just over 18% live in extreme poverty. Although many of the region's countries are currently experiencing economic growth (as measured in GDP), inequities continue to rise. This is true despite many intensive poverty reduction efforts, suggesting that high levels of inequity remain largely intractable.

The relationship between living conditions on the coast and overall socioeconomic conditions is not clear, however. Globally, coastal communities exhibit a higher level of human well-being than inland

areas, thanks in large part to the availability of coastal resources and the provision of important ecosystem services. In the LAC region, human well-being is high in some coastal areas, but so, too, is economic inequality. Many coastal communities are economically disadvantaged and politically marginalized. Of particular concern in coastal areas are migration to the coasts (from inland or from other countries) and gender inequality in access to marine resources and in resource pricing.

For USAID's coastal and marine biodiversity investment to produce meaningful environmental and economic outcomes, the limited funds must be strategically focused. Analysis of threats to marine biodiversity as well as opportunities for promoting effective conservation suggest a few key geographic priorities, including the Hispaniola subregion (including Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Jamaica), and the southwestern Caribbean subregion (including mainly Colombia, Nicaragua, and Panama). It is suggested that USAID assume a major role in catalyzing further investigation into threats and opportunities in these key regions, and that it try to leverage its funds as much as possible to develop what may become model projects for the region as a whole.

USAID would be wise to invest in a wide range of conservation tools, by supporting a diversity of conservation interventions, each appropriate to the ecological, sociopolitical, and economic circumstances of the site or subregion. One major tool will undoubtedly be the strengthening of existing marine protected areas (MPAs) or developing new ones. Key issues relating to coastal and marine biodiversity and the conditions of human welfare in coastal societies can be addressed through MPAs and MPA networks. For instance, the issues of equity, fisheries overexploitation, and fisheries-related livelihoods can be part of MPA planning if a comprehensive and holistic approach is adopted. Establishing well-controlled, self-governed fishing cooperatives with membership open to women fishers may help in many cases to reduce competition-driven overexploitation and to promote gender equality. Many marine conservation tools can help generate direct revenue to local communities (through entry fees, bed taxes,

head taxes, and the like), while indirect revenue streams can be built from the service sector. However, these combinations of opportunities require additional evaluation at sub-regional or site-based levels of detail.

If USAID is to play a significant role in promoting marine and coastal biodiversity conservation in the LAC region, it is important to identify and groom future leaders in conservation, whether in the public or private sector. It would also serve long-term biodiversity and development if USAID were to actively search for ways to foster public/private partnerships throughout the region. Mechanisms for achieving these leadership and partnership goals will vary with the culture and social conditions of the countries within which USAID chooses to direct its coastal and marine biodiversity funding. USAID is also seen by many professionals within the region as having convening power, so this program could leverage its limited resources to galvanize and facilitate interregional progress, starting with the discussion of important issues. It could serve an important role as a neutral broker in biodiversity and sustainable development discussions and initiatives.

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