

USG and Embassy activities in Panama

The U.S. Embassy is leading by example in design, management, and community involvement in environmental issues. The Embassy, which opened in September 2007, is the only LEED-certified building in Panama. We have taken additional steps to obtain energy efficiency and other benefits, such as adopting an alternative work schedule, which eases traffic congestion and energy consumption, and reducing energy usage by lowering air conditioner usage and turning off computers during non-peak hours. Embassy officials have volunteered their time to community environmental events, including most recently, cleaning up a city park with locals from the nearby school of music and other interested Panamanians. We also periodically meet with key environmental NGOs to discuss key environmental issues, including most recently talking about climate change and the negotiations leading to Copenhagen.

Through the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), the U.S. Government is working with the Panamanian government and people to become the leading international research center on tropical ecosystems. The scientific knowledge gained through STRI benefits the world and Panama, where STRI works with the Environmental National Authority, Secretariat for Science and Technology, and others to give students and the public an opportunity to view and learn from the astounding biodiversity of the Isthmus.

The U.S. Government is working with partners to foster the sustainable management of water resources and forests and increase biodiversity conservation within four key sub-watersheds and two protected areas of the Panama Canal Watershed while providing ways to enhance the economic well-being of local residents. Work in the buffer zones will focus on arresting threats to the protected areas. Improvement of the policy and regulatory framework and the efforts to increase local participation in governance will facilitate work with farm owners, protected area officials and other key stakeholders, generating a change in behavior and compliance with environmental regulations, in a favorable environment for achieving conservation objectives.

We are working on sustainable community forestry in Darien. Efforts to sustainably manage the forest of the region will be undermined unless economic and social needs are identified and addressed. The dichotomy between ecosystems and communities rich in natural resources, but poor in economic opportunities, generates the conditions so that the immediate needs of local communities threaten a large carbon sink for the world. We will focus our attention on building capacity within the indigenous communities in the Darien to manage their forests and other natural resources in a manner that is sustainable, protects the biodiversity inherent to the region, and improves livelihoods in the short run.

The United States, with the involvement of The Nature Conservancy, has forgiven \$21 million in debt-for-nature swaps pursuant to the U.S. Tropical Forest Conservation Act of 1998 in Chagres National Park (signed 2003) and Darien National Park (signed 2004). The relief will allow the Government of Panama to focus on the protection of Chagres National Park (a haven for numerous endangered animals, including birds, jaguars, anteaters, harpy eagles and mantled howler monkeys) and Darién National Park (an area of dense rainforest, sandy beaches, freshwater marshes and rocky coasts that is environmentally, anthropologically and historically rich).

Panama is the base for a true “space to village” collaboration, where the Regional Visualization & Monitoring System (SERVIR) is based at CATHALAC. This cooperation between the United States, including NASA, and the countries of Central America and the Dominican Republic, provides an early warning system for environmental disasters, supports decision-making in the areas of climate change adaptation, and is a regional clearinghouse of information and training.

Peace Corp Volunteers (PCV) are providing hands-on environmental assistance. There are 30 PCV supporting the Environmental National Authority and the Education Ministry education initiatives, and an additional 36 PCVs partnering with the Ministry of Agriculture to provide technical assistance to small farmers in high production, low-impact organic farming techniques.