Title

On 2 February, Grupo Jaragua (BirdLife in the Dominican Republic) started their 2011 calendar of environmental festivities by celebrating World Wetlands Day with a program of educational activities about the conservation and sustainable use of Laguna de Oviedo. The activities were aimed at educating and fostering community participation with a particular focus on young students, teachers and local service providers from the local community of El Cajuil, located close to the lagoon. Laguna de Oviedo is on the east coast of the Jaragua National Park (IBA D007), in south-west Dominican Republic. At 27 km2 it is one of the largest lagoons in the country. The lagoon is a hypersaline wetland with extensive mangrove forests, rich birdlife and 24 cays or islets, which provide important habitat for many species of waterfowl. On one of the cays is a population of the Vulnerable Rhinoceros Iguana *Cyclura cornuta*. "Laguna de Oviedo provides a series of environmental goods and services to the surrounding communities, and there is a tradition of use by local people," said Laura Perdomo, Coordinator of the Neotropical Mangrove Conservation Alliance (based in Dominican Republic). "However, the wetland habitat and the natural resources it supports are under constant pressure due to persistent unsustainable use practices". Grupo Jaragua?s program of activities comprised an educational presentation at a local school followed by a trip to Laguna de Oviedo. Wetlands educational materials were distributed, and World Wetlands Day was promoted on a national television channel. The school presentation was delivered by the Local Conservation Group ? Voluntarios Comunitarios de Jaragua ? who explained the importance of wetlands to students and teachers at the elementary school in El Cajuil community. The following day was the excursion to the lagoon of Oviedo which was attended by elementary and high school students and other guests including the Executive Director of the Dominican Network of Rural Ecotourism (REDOTUR), and a Peace Corps volunteer. Also present where representatives from Grupo Jaragua and the BirdLife Americas Secretariat (based in the Dominican Republic) who where part of the planning and coordination team.

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http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/niños1-300x198.jpg

Local guide Melvin González teaches two young school children about the birds of laguna de Oviedo

The Laguna de Oviedo field trip lasted five hours, including a three hour boat trip. It was led by a local guide and through his commentary the participants learned about the lake?s fauna and flora; on the links between neighboring communities and Laguna de Oviedo; and on the resources provided by the wetland. "La Laguna de Oviedo is very important for the nation?s flora and fauna, and is vital for local people as well?, commented Melvin Gonzalez, a member of the Oviedo Nature Guides Association. ?For example, red mangroves are critical in supporting young crabs and fish. Therefore they are important to fishermen whose livelihoods depend on the same fish and crabs. In addition, mangroves help to protect us from storms and floods?, he concluded. Grupo Jaragua sees education as a cross-cutting theme for the achievement of conservation goals. They also recognize that education is more effective if people can interact directly with their natural environment. With this in mind Grupo Jaragua implements programs and activities of environmental education and awareness based on experiential learning. "The programs are planned and implemented with the collaboration of several key players and delivered around specific environmental ?days?, which are driven by international organizations or conventions," said Yvonne Arias, President of Grupo Jaragua. "Such is the case of World Wetlands Day and the CEPA program

, which are initiatives of the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (or ?Ramsar Convention?), which the Dominican Republic is a signatory of." Similar activities were developed in Lac Azuéi IBA (HTD006) in Haiti. The program of activities in commemoration of wetlands was conducted within the framework of a larger program of work called "**Laguna de Oviedo and Lac Azuéi as living classrooms to foster communication, education, awareness and public participation in the wetlands of the Spanish**" which was supported by the International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Dominican Association of Ex - Scholars from Japan. Photos in this news note by Jerson Mateo