Title

A new alliance of BirdLife Partners and other organisations aims to conserve, restore and manage mangrove forests sustainably throughout the American tropics. The Neotropical Mangrove Conservation Alliance has already received a huge boost, with support from the MacArthur Foundation to coordinate activities put mangrove conservation actions in place at priority sites in the Caribbean islands.

Continued loss due to unsustainable development practices, over-exploitation and climate change have resulted in mangroves being considered one of the world's most threatened ecosystems. Between 1980 and 2005, Neotropical mangroves were reduced to 23% of their former extent in North and Central America and the Caribbean, and 10% in South America.

During BirdLife's World Conference in Argentina in 2008, mangroves were identified as a priority habitat for conservation action. "There is considerable experience in mangrove conservation and sustainable management projects among Partners and supporting organisations in the Americas", said David Wege, Senior Caribbean Program Manager. "So the strategy chosen was to develop an alliance to facilitate experience sharing, networking, capacity building and development of partnerships between BirdLife and other organisations, groups and individuals."

The Neotropical Mangrove Conservation Alliance approach builds upon the successes of the Southern Cone Grasslands Alliance, established by BirdLife Partners in southern South America, and now being expanded to include other organisations.

"Compared to rainforests, mangroves are architecturally less complex and have received less public attention", explained Laura Perdomo, Neotropical Mangrove Conservation Alliance Coordinator based in Grupo Jaragua BirdLife in the Dominican Republic). "However, mangrove ecosystems are one of the most productive in the world. They are often part of a mosaic of ecological, social and economic processes, and may be regarded as 'socio-ecosystems'. They play a crucial role in reducing impacts of severe weather events and climate change, and provide a range of ecosystem products and services which are particularly significant to local coastal communities."

According to the recently published World Atlas of Mangroves (2010), mangroves now occupy only 140,000-150,000 km of the shorelines of the world. Based on the Global Marine Species Assessment, there are roughly 70 species of mangroves, 11 of which are on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

In 2010, thanks to support from the Conservation Leadership Programme and the United States Forest Service, the initial steps to catalyse the establishment of the Neotropical Mangrove Conservation Alliance were taken. Partners from 12 countries and territories put their creative and strategic thinking into action to shape the Mangrove Alliance, before it expanded to a broader network of institutions.

Support has also been given by The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to put Mangrove Alliance conservation actions in place at priority sites in the insular Caribbean region. The Caribbean has the second highest rate of mangrove habitat loss, and the rate of loss and coastal vulnerability is likely to worsen because of the severe weather events which are common in the region, exacerbated by climate change.

The three-year project, *Conserving Caribbean mangroves in the face of a changing world*, will coordinate a collaborative alliance among Caribbean and international stakeholders dedicated to the conservation and sustainable management of mangrove ecosystems; mainstream the importance of mangrove biodiversity and ecosystem services into local, national and regional decision-making processes; and catalyze or consolidate community-based site-specific conservation and management actions.

"Mangrove ecosystems are dynamic, productive, closely intertwined environments", Laura Perdomo said. "Similarly, BirdLife foresees this initiative as a dynamic, open network of public and private organisations and agencies dedicated to the conservation and sustainable management of mangrove ecosystems in the Neotropics."