

Minister of the Environment signs into destruction of Sierra de Bahoruco IBA, Dominican Republic

Title

Sierra de Bahoruco, an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area in the Dominican Republic has been recently identified as an **IBA in Danger**, mainly due to charcoal burning and illegal agricultural practices. Moreover, on 16 July 2013, a dry forest area on its northern foothills formally protected as Loma Charco Azul Biological Reserve has started to be cleared to make way for an agricultural settlement though the area continues to be “protected” as a Biological Reserve. The Dominican Agrarian Institute, responsible for the destruction, has shown a permit for this activity signed by the Minister of the Environment himself (Dr. Bautista Rojas Gómez). The project is supposedly an alternative agricultural solution for the families affected by the water level rise of Enriquillo Lagoon IBA. However, the area is extremely arid, and there is no irrigation in place, making it difficult to have a productive farm. Approximately 105 hectares are marked for immediate destruction. The impacted area comprises the largest portion of habitat that remains for the IUCN Red List Critically Endangered Ricord's Iguana *Cyclura ricordii*, found only in the southwest of the Dominican Republic. The hills of Loma Charco Azul are also habitat for the Endangered Bay-breasted Cuckoo *Coccyzus ruficularis*, an endemic bird with a very limited distribution in Hispaniola. Loma Charco Azul Biological Reserve also falls under the larger Jaragua-Bahoruco-Enriquillo Biosphere Reserve ratified by UNESCO. The importance of the area for conservation has furthermore been recognized by former President Leonel Fernández granting it the status of Reserve in 2009. This was a big achievement for Grupo Jaragua, which had been lobbying for protection of this area that lies within the Sierra de Bahoruco IBA.

Image not found

Undisturbed habitat for the Ricord's Iguana in Loma Charco Azul Biological Reserve.

Photo: Grupo Jaragua.

Grupo Jaragua (BirdLife in the Dominican Republic) and local collaborators are in emergency

alert trying to stop the bulldozers, notifying the media and other environmental groups. The National Academy of Sciences and the Environmental Commission of the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo have joined in their fight and in different mass media outlets. Also the National Institute of Lawyers for the Protection of the Environment is preparing legal action against this measure, as this contravenes the National Environment Law 64-00, and sets a very dangerous precedent for all protected areas of the Dominican Republic. Grupo Jaragua is also in constant communication with the Environmental Attorney's Office to attempt to halt the forest clearings. Unfortunately, an area of approximately 7.2 ha was already destroyed early in the morning of July 17th. Grupo Jaragua staff and local collaborators from Duvergé are working around the clock to keep what is left of the forest.