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In the closing hours of the climate change conference in Cancún, Mexico, agreement seems to be close on REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), which would provide a mechanism for delivering financial incentives to developing countries to conserve and restore their forests. A series of high-level speakers at the 16th Conference of the Parties (COP-16) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and at a number of associated high level events in Cancún, have urged agreement on REDD+. They include UN General Secretary Ban Ki-Moon, the presidents of Mexico and Guyana and the prime minister of Norway, among others. Many have stressed the need to recognise the biodiversity and social benefits of REDD+. A REDD+ mechanism would aim to maintain and restore carbon stocks in forests. Forested developing countries would undertake to reduce their emissions from deforestation below a historic reference level, and would be financially compensated for doing so. "Integrating forests into climate mitigation and adaptation needs accelerating," said Melanie Heath, BirdLife's Senior Advisor on Climate Change. "Valuing a forest only for its carbon is like valuing a computer chip only for its silicon. The benefits for biodiversity and local livelihoods must not be viewed as add-ons, but as central to a successful REDD scheme." It is looking increasingly likely that there will be a framework agreement on REDD+ in Cancún, although this is not yet certain, and it still remains unclear whether this will contain all the elements we would like to see in such an agreement, said Melanie Heath. Safeguards are key to an effective REDD mechanism. "REDD only makes sense if it conserves natural forests and biodiversity, because it is the plants and animals in natural forests that help create their carbon density," Melanie Heath explained. "It must also respect and protect the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities. The safeguards are designed to ensure REDD+ achieves these multiple benefits, while establishing a foundation of good governance." She says that how these safeguards are to be measured, reported and verified is being hotly debated. "There are various text options under consideration, ranging from agreeing to monitor and report on safeguards, to pushing this topic to COP-17 next year for further consideration." The issue of how to finance REDD is also key. "There needs to be long-term, adequate and predictable funding. \$4.5 billion fast-start financing has been pledged, but this needs to flow and much more is needed. It is estimated that \$35 billion will be needed annually by 2020 for REDD. No new pledges have been made this COP to date." International agreements provide the framework and the legal teeth but it is real actions on the ground that count. Here social and environmental standards, such as those defined by the CCB (the Climate, Community and Biodiversity Alliance), are important. The CCB has recently validated and verified a project being jointly implemented by BirdLife Partner Guyra Paraguay and the World Land Trust at San Rafael, one of the largest patches of threatened Atlantic Forest remaining in Paraguay. The 405 bird species recorded so far include 70 Atlantic Forest endemics, and 16 Near Threatened and 12 globally threatened species. The project will pay the people of the La Amistad small-holder settlement, which lies within the forest, to retain and improve the quality of forest on their land, in preference to clearing it for agriculture. The project will also work with the Mbyá Guarani, the indigenous people of the San Rafael area, helping them secure broader recognition of their interests and rights in their traditional territories. "This is just one example of the work being done by BirdLife Partners around the world, which anticipates the kind of projects REDD+ will make possible," Melanie Heath said. "Because of its long record of working with communities at Important Bird Areas on conservation and livelihoods projects, the Birdlife Partnership is ideally placed to translate REDD+ into national and local actions."