Title

What happens when one of the world's highest priority biodiversity hotspots is home to over 37 million people of high cultural diversity?

The Caribbean is an exceptionally important area for global biodiversity. These assorted islands support highly unique plant and animal species. For example: of the 770 bird species living in the area, 105 are confined to single islands. Yet these islands are also an important home to 37.5 million people who are crammed into a small land area about the same size as the state of Arizona, US. Inevitably, the demands for land are such that only c.10% of the region's original habitat remains, which means that the Caribbean is a high priority for global conservation.

With so many people living and working amongst some of the world's rarest species, it is impractical to designate the whole of the Caribbean a protected region. So, after several years of research, in 2001 BirdLife International had identified and described 285 sites of high biodiversity value, called Important Bird Areas (IBAs). An acclaimed concept, IBAs provide discrete priority sites where conservation action can be directed most effectively.

Helping local people to protect their local biodiversity

Identifying a site is just the first step. The next is working on the ground to plan and create realistic conservation action there.

And this is exactly what BirdLife did with *"Sustainable Conservation of Globally Important Caribbean Bird Habitats: Strengthening a Regional Network for a Shared Resource."* The donor for the project was the Global Environment Facility (GEF), who has funded hundreds of schemes around the world: this particular BirdLife Caribbean project was recently celebrated as one of GEF's all-time top 20. This is because it enhanced conservation efforts at IBAs by massively increasing public awareness and by working with, and actually creating, local networks.

> *"It is fair to say that without the project tens of thousands of people in the Caribbean would not have been exposed to bird and site conservation issues"*

An unemployed Saint Lucian may now take up a job in a new ecotourism venture at their local IBA. A Jamaican bauxite miner may now question their choice of mining site. A teacher will explain how the Endangered Jamaican Blackbird their class saw that morning is an indicator of the health of their local ecosystem.

As illustrated by the Caribbean's diversity in both biology and culture, every IBA is different and every local person associated with it has different needs. By integrating conservation and development through a process of local community empowerment, bottom-up decision-making and support for people's needs, BirdLife International and its local Partners continue to help people to achieve secure, sustainable livelihoods that are positively linked to natural ecosystems.

No matter what culture, once people want to protect a site and are linked with others that do too, the task of conserving the Caribbean's biodiversity for the benefit of nature and local people is a lot easier.

BirdLife International has grown into a global Partnership, working with 117 Partners worldwide in order to make a sustainable difference for nature and people.

In Cuba, Centro Nacional de Áreas Protegidas (CNAP)*; in the Dominican Republic,* Grupo Jaragua (GJI) *; in the Bahamas,* Bahamas National Trust (BNT)*; and in Puerto Rico,* Sociedad Ornitológica Puertorriqueña, Inc. (SOPI) *are the BirdLife Partners working in the Caribbean. This article is part of a series celebrating BirdLife International's 90th Anniversary.*

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