

In Review

### ***Las Perlas Archipelago Project: Behind the scenes***

The main purpose of this project has been to build up research and habitat information about the marine and coastal environment of Las Perlas Archipelago to properly enable its designation by Panamanian authorities as a Special Management Zone. This objective has been pursued by the team conformed by Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), and Heriot-Watt University (HWU) funded by the Darwin Initiative (DI) and the objective realized with recent legislation (June 2007) designating the Las Perlas Special Management Zone.

The project's objectives were achieved by:

1. Establishing a research group, locally and from abroad dedicated to the survey of the area's littoral and sub-littoral habitats.
2. Providing advanced training for three Panamanian Darwin Fellows so that each could specialize in different aspects of the study. These three formed the core of this research group, during the Darwin Initiative project Phase I, and afterwards, continuing with a contribution of monitoring and advising on park management guidelines and products.
3. Increasing awareness (through, a. - school and community educational information material, and b. - scientific publications and conferences) to promote the designation of the Park so that the Archipelago's important marine natural and commercial resources can be protected and sustainably managed.

Since the first field trip to Las Perlas in August 2003, HWU and STRI have united resources, knowledge, ideas and students to conduct important research. Both as part of a Master's thesis, a PhD thesis, or continuing scientific monitoring, each year teams travel to Las Perlas and increasingly and strategically we have been aiming to assess and bring about all the ecological and biological information that will give us the bases to create protection plans for this important marine environment. These have included coral coverage, sponge ecology, pollution detection, fish landings, fishermen opinion surveys, land-use analysis, marine depleted resources, bird and reptile surveys, mangrove ecology, and plankton analysis.

In May 2007, we organized the fifth annual field trip to Las Perlas Archipelago for five HWU students (plus another two students from University College London) undergoing research to complement our list of studies to support the scientific background for the Special Management Zone designation. After four years of work by the Darwin project team, the final designation was signed this past May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2007, and appeared on Gaceta Oficial of June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2007; declaring Las Perlas Special Management Zone.

This accomplishment is the result of a combined effort of a large group of scientists, students, fellows, stakeholders, and political committees and, most importantly the support of the people of the islands who at first-hand helped point out the ecological status of the resources and indicated that they want to be closely involved in solutions for their appropriate and long-term sustainable management.

This is not the end: it is only the first part for managing and protecting the marine environment we have grown to understand and admire through monthly and yearly visits, and it is a promise to the people and the ecosystem of Las Perlas that we must comply with in order to preserve it for future generations.

*Inez Campbell*