

Bird-friendly coffee and beyond: A holistic approach to conservation in two Key Biodiversity Areas in the Dominican Republic

Port of Spain, 15 December 2023 –The Sociedad Ornitológica de la Hispaniola (SOH Conservación) is on a mission to safeguard the unique ecosystems of two Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) in the Dominican Republic and the livelihoods intertwined with them. Recognising that protecting nature is not just about the land but also the communities that rely on the land and that safeguarding these ecosystems extends beyond the boundaries of the protected areas themselves, SOH Conservación is taking an integrated and multi-faceted approach to working in the area. With support from CEPF, SOH Conservación is strengthening the management of the Sierra de Bahoruco National Park and the Padre Miguel Domingo Fuerte Natural Monument (Bahoruco Oriental) KBAs, enhancing connectivity between these areas and fostering sustainable livelihoods that reinforce this vital connectivity.



Keeping shade cover on coffee farms protects insect- and nectar-eating birds, which, in turn, offer ecosystem services by controlling pests and pollinating crops for free. Credit: SOH Conservación.

SOH Conservación's sustainable livelihoods and connectivity approach includes promoting shade-grown, bird-friendly coffee in the buffer zone corridor between the two KBAs. This is an important strategy for stopping deforestation and forest degradation and addressing climate change concerns while empowering communities economically through environmentally conscious coffee production that can fetch higher prices in international markets, particularly when certified by a recognised international scheme.

Under the CEPF-supported project "Improving management to mitigate threats in the Sierra de Bahoruco and Bahoruco Oriental KBAs," SOH Conservación is building on ongoing efforts. They aim to transition coffee farmers to organic and conservation coffee while having them certified to US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Japanese Agricultural (JAS) organic standards.

Working with government agencies and other partners, like INCATCARIBE and INDOCAFE, SOH Conservación has been training local coffee producers in agroforestry and biodiversity management and working towards certification through the Smithsonian Bird Friendly® label and alignment with the Dominican Republic's "Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation" (REDD+) programme. By the end of 2024,

SOH Conservación hopes to have established demonstration coffee plots covering 15 hectares under the REDD+ Dominican Republic programme and 60 hectares under the Bird Friendly® coffee programme.

To date, 56 producers in and around the communities of Polo, Las Auyama, La Lanza and Cortico in Barhona Province have taken part in workshops focusing on organic farming, agroforestry, and the REDD+ and Bird Friendly® programmes. But transitioning to certified organic farming does not take place overnight and it is not without costs and challenges. This has prompted SOH Conservación to

pursue interim strategies such as exploring the feasibility of a "Bahoruco" denomination for marketing purposes, even as farmers move towards organic certification. In response to needs identified during the workshops, SOH Conservación is also working on a proposal to the Banco Agrícola de la República Dominicana to facilitate credit access for at least 100 small coffee-growing families, negotiating favourable loan terms to support sustainable practices while relieving financial burdens. SOH's simultaneous work with coffee producers cataloguing bird species in and around the coffee fields is a crucial step in the transition to conservation coffee. This data will make it possible to use bird presence and distribution as indicators of environmental health and conservation success.

SOH Conservación's commitment to supporting alternative sustainable livelihoods for the communities living in and around these KBAs extends to ecotourism. They are preparing an ecotourism business plan, developing and improving trails, and have collaborated with the Technological Institute of Santo Domingo (INTEC) to upskill local guides, who have since come together as the Association of Tourist Guides. These guides will play a vital role in advocating for and safeguarding the KBAs and. SOH Conservación is now helping the association to incorporate legally.

Alongside these sustainable livelihoods efforts, SOH Conservación is working with the authorities to strengthen the management of the KBAs and restore habitats. It has supported the preparation of annual operational plans for Sierra de Bahoruco and Bahoruco Oriental that have been approved by the Dominican Republic's Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources and are now guiding management actions and resource allocation in the KBAs.

Investing in training and education for those involved in managing the KBAs enhances their skills so they can effectively carry out their roles and functions. SOH Conservación has also built the capacity of more than 70 park rangers, administrators and military personnel working in the two protected areas through workshops and field-based training sessions in areas that contribute to the management of protected areas. Topics covered have included such things GPS techniques, field patrolling and data collection, and species monitoring.

In tandem, twelve dedicated SOH volunteers have received specialised training in GPS techniques, while community outreach initiatives have successfully engaged more than 500 individuals in the project's target communities.

Habitat restoration activities are also underway, with the planting of seedlings on 77 hectares in the buffer zones of both KBAs. This reforestation is expected to support CO² absorption and enhance the region's climate change resilience over time.



Polo Magnetico is a tourist attraction on the outskirts of Sierra de Bahoruco National Park, where an optical illusion creates the surreal appearance of vehicles defying gravity by seemingly rolling uphill. The route forms part of SOH's ecotourism network in the region. Credit: Liliana Betancourt.



*Seedlings have been planted on 77 hectares of the Sierra de Bahoruco - Bahoruco Oriental corridor as part of reforestation efforts.
Credit: SOH Conservación.*

Although the SOH Conservación project is still unfolding in the Sierra de Bahoruco and Bahoruco Oriental KBAs, it demonstrates a practical application of CEPF's goal to preserve biodiversity while supporting communities, illustrating how conservation and community well-being can intersect.

For further information, please contact: Wendy Dymma-Harper, CEPF Communication and Information Management Officer, at caribbeanrit@canari.org.

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