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Eleventh Meeting of the Scientific and Technical
Advisory Committee (STAC) of the Protocol
Concerning Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife
(SPA W) in the Wider Caribbean Region

Panama City, Panama
30 June – 3 July 2025

Saltwatta Roots Initiative

This meeting is being convened hybrid. Delegates are kindly requested to access all meeting documents electronically for download as necessary.

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Subject: Informative Document for the Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee of the SPAW Protocol

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1. Executive Summary of the Saltwatta Roots Initiative

The Saltwatta Roots Initiative (hereinafter “the Initiative” or “Saltwatta Roots”) is a regional coordination platform led by ethnic, fishing, and scientific leaders from the Southwestern Caribbean. It promotes a joint environmental governance model based on cooperation among neighboring countries and the participation of local communities. Its fundamental objective is to establish a concerted roadmap among the six countries that share the mosaic of ecosystems in this region (Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, and Panama). For over five (5) years, the Initiative has advocated for the creation of a Transboundary Biosphere Reserve that recognizes the ecological, cultural, and historical connectivity of the shared marine territory. This also serves as a way to mitigate the environmental consequences of territorial disputes among the countries in the area.

This report aims to outline the proposal and progress of Saltwatta Roots before the Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) of the SPAW Protocol, within the framework of its objectives for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in the Greater Caribbean. Over five years of work, the Initiative has developed an environmental advocacy agenda with the governments of these six countries, built a network of organizations and social leadership, and drafted a roadmap toward a joint environmental management model to safeguard the most important marine-coastal biodiversity hotspot in the Western Hemisphere.

Saltwatta Roots aligns with the principles of the SPAW Protocol by striving to strengthen regional cooperation with nature as a priority and recognizing the leadership of local communities in the recovery and conservation of ecosystems. This report also seeks to open a channel of collaboration with STAC to strengthen the scientific, technical, and political foundations of the proposed Transboundary Biosphere Reserve in the Southwestern Caribbean.

2. Context and Justification

Situation in the Southwestern Caribbean: biodiversity, threats, and governance

The Southwestern Caribbean hosts the third-largest coral reef system in the world and has been recognized by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) as the region with the highest concentration of marine biodiversity in the Western Hemisphere. Despite its great environmental value, the region today faces threats common to many marine-coastal ecosystems in the Greater Caribbean: pollution, overfishing, biodiversity loss, invasive species, coral bleaching, sea-level rise, extractive industries, ocean acidification, increasingly aggressive climate events, among other challenges already well-known to the STAC of the SPAW Protocol.

The region's biodiversity provides economic livelihood for local communities through artisanal and subsistence fishing and tourism. It is also the primary protection for coastal inhabitants against erosion and climate extremes. For decades, evidence has shown that due to the threats it faces, the Caribbean ecosystem is heading toward imminent collapse.

Historical gap in regional coordination and ethnic participation in conservation

Each state has addressed the region's critical situation through distinct approaches, without joint efforts beyond traditional diplomatic relations centered on territorial sovereignty and exclusive economic zones. These relationships exclude not only the diplomatic capacity of the territories that directly depend on the Caribbean but also that of the Indigenous peoples who have safeguarded this sea for over four (4) centuries. Despite being united by history and culture, they remain divided by national borders that do not correspond to their maritime culture or the natural rhythms of marine biodiversity.

The historical absence of coordination mechanisms among states, combined with the lack of inclusion of Indigenous peoples in environmental decision-making, has led to conservation or resource management efforts being hindered by the actions of one or more other countries sharing the same sea. Avoiding ecological collapse in the Caribbean requires more than unilateral actions within national jurisdictions.

Saltwatta Roots proposal: strategic and innovative

Saltwatta Roots emerges from this need, aiming to build a path toward joint environmental governance in the Southwestern Caribbean. In a historically fragmented context, this effort seeks to establish intercultural and multidisciplinary cooperation dialogues among local Caribbean communities, academic stakeholders, and political actors in the region. The goal is to bring into the diplomatic equation actors who have historically been excluded from environmental governance, offering an alternative model that transcends political borders.



2 Fronteras en Caribe Suroccidental.

Green polygon: Current Seaflower Biosphere Reserve

Yellow outline: Proposed area for the joint management model

Yellow area: Colombia

Orange area: Costa Rica

Aquamarine blue area: Honduras

Green area: Jamaica

Dark blue area: Nicaragua

Pink area: Panama

Red pin: Archipelago of San Andrés, Providencia, and Santa Catalina

3. Description of the Initiative

General and Specific Objectives

General Objective: Consolidate environmental governance in the Southwestern Caribbean to protect the region's ecological and cultural diversity by creating a Transboundary Biosphere Reserve.

Specific Objectives:

- Promote international cooperation and ethnic diplomacy among the involved countries.
- Encourage the active participation of local communities and Indigenous peoples in the environmental governance of the Southwestern Caribbean.
- Strengthen regional scientific networks.

Key Stakeholders

1. **Ethnic Peoples of the Southwestern Caribbean:** This region is home to a rich diversity of Indigenous peoples (Creole, Bribri, Ngäbe-Buglé, Garífuna, Kunas, Miskitos, Rama, Suma/Mayangnas), with cultures deeply tied to the sea and its biodiversity. These communities have developed sustainable practices based on their maritime culture, generating knowledge fundamental to any shared environmental governance model.
2. **Local Organizations:** Saltwatta Roots is supported by community networks, fishers' associations, youth collectives, ethnic leadership, and NGOs operating across the six countries. These actors have been essential in driving the Initiative forward and legitimizing its roadmap at the local level.
3. **Academic Institutions:** Universities, research centers, and scientific networks have provided technical knowledge and interdisciplinary approaches to the Initiative from the beginning. Through collaboration with these stakeholders, Saltwatta Roots has generated inputs for planning joint environmental management, with a focus on ecological and cultural connectivity. Their participation strengthens the scientific and technical foundation of the proposal.
4. **Institutional Entities:** This includes environment ministries, foreign ministries, territorial authorities, technical agencies, and multilateral organizations with decision-making power and state representation. The Initiative has built close relationships with these entities, facilitating high-level dialogues and management spaces that explore political will for regional conservation. Their commitment is key to scaling the proposal diplomatically.

Strategic Work Areas

Over its five years of work, Saltwatta Roots has identified three essential thematic pillars for the success of a transboundary conservation initiative. These must operate in constant dialogue: institutional engagement, ethnic diplomacy, and academic networking.

1. **Institutional Engagement Pillar:** Focuses on facilitating dialogue among government actors from the six countries. It prioritizes socialization of the roadmap and exploration of political will. As of May 2025, three key milestones have been achieved under this pillar:
 - a. **High-level dialogue at the CITES COP19 side event (2022):** Panama was designated as a facilitator of dialogue among the other five countries, leveraging its strong bilateral relations. The need for environmental restoration in the Southwestern Caribbean was placed on a UN international stage. Panama announced the expansion of the Banco Volcán reserve and proposed its use as a transboundary conservation area.
 - b. **Meeting of Southwestern Caribbean Delegations in Bogotá (August 2024):** Delegates from the environment ministries of Panama, Costa Rica, Jamaica, Honduras, and Nicaragua attended an event organized by Saltwatta Roots and Colombia's Minister of Environment, Susana Muhammad, to

discuss the importance of a shared environmental mechanism. Minister Muhammad invited her counterparts to a ministerial panel to discuss coordinated conservation and restoration efforts.

- c. **High-level dialogue at the CBD COP16 (November 2024):** Environment ministers from Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia participated in a ministerial panel to discuss the urgency of joint action in the region. They committed to collaborating with the Initiative, contingent upon expressions of support from each country's local communities.
2. **Ethnic Diplomacy Pillar:** Seeks to elevate the leadership of Indigenous peoples in biological and cultural preservation, productive development, and community-driven zoning methods for conservation. As of May 2025, two key milestones include:
 - a. **First Creole Gathering at the Green Moon Festival in San Andrés Island (September 2021):** The first meeting of Afro-Caribbean leaders supported by Saltwatta Roots. It marked the first formal demand for a shared environmental management system among Caribbean states.
 - b. **Second Creole Gathering in Cahuita, Costa Rica (September 2022):** Leaders met again to renew the call for a joint environmental governance framework and jointly launched the First Afro-Caribbean Manifesto.
3. **Academic Pillar:** Aims to establish the scientific-technical foundation for a transboundary environmental governance model and activate a Caribbean Academic Network to support the process. Two academic dialogues were held with experts on transboundary ecosystem conservation and Caribbean environmental governance. These informed the Initiative's roadmap and fed into high-level discussions.

4. Relevance of Saltwatta Roots to the SPAW Protocol

Key Species Conservation:

Saltwatta Roots focuses on protecting the Southwestern Caribbean's biological and cultural diversity. This includes safeguarding critical and threatened habitats such as coral reefs, seagrass beds, and mangroves, as well as vulnerable species like the parrotfish, hawksbill turtle, various cetaceans, and others listed in Annexes I, II, and III of the SPAW Protocol, which establish levels of protection for marine and coastal flora and fauna across the Greater Caribbean.

Participation of Local Communities in Environmental Management:

At the heart of the Initiative are Indigenous Afro-Caribbean communities, who are the primary advocates of a shared environmental governance model among states. These communities have developed complex maritime cultures with high potential for restoring the Greater Caribbean through traditional fishing, navigation practices, agriculture, and more. Their deep ecological knowledge of species regeneration and coastal ecosystem health is

central to the proposed governance model. Saltwatta Roots promotes not only their participation but also their leadership in decision-making and environmental management.

International Cooperation Among States of the Greater Caribbean:

Saltwatta Roots provides a concrete application of the regional cooperation principles enshrined in the SPAW Protocol (Article 7) and the Cartagena Convention (Articles 3, 10, and 13), establishing coordination mechanisms among states for joint conservation of shared marine-coastal ecosystems. The Initiative proposes an institutional architecture that not only responds to current multilateral commitments but strengthens them by placing Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities at the center of environmental governance in the Greater Caribbean.

Ecological Corridors and Protected Area Connectivity:

By proposing a Transboundary Biosphere Reserve, the Initiative promotes a network of 35 protected areas across six countries, emphasizing ecological connectivity and joint ecosystem management. This aligns directly with Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which aims to protect at least 30% of oceans by 2030. A shared governance system in the Southwestern Caribbean would also integrate the region with other successful transboundary conservation experiences in the Greater Caribbean, such as:

- The Caribbean Biological Corridor (Cuba, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Puerto Rico)
- The Mesoamerican Reef System (Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico), which houses the world's second-largest coral reef barrier.

Protected areas

HONDURAS

- Cayos Miskitos Marine National Park
- Karatasca Lagoon Biological Reserve
- Bacalar Lagoon
- Kruta National Park
- Abogado Agustín Córdova Rodríguez Protected Area (Swan Island)
- Bay Islands Marine National Park
- Turtle Harbour Wildlife Refuge
- Archipelago de Cayos Cochinos Marine Natural Monument
- Cuero y Salado Wildlife Refuge
- Punta Izopo Wildlife Refuge

NICARAGUA

- Bluefields Bay Wetlands System
- Cayos Perlas Wildlife Refuge
- Cayos Miskitos Marine Biological Reserve
- Nicaraguan Caribbean Biosphere Reserve

COSTA RICA

- Gandoca-Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge
- Cahuita National Park
- Tortuguero National Park
- Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge
- Barra del Colorado Wildlife Refuge

PANAMA

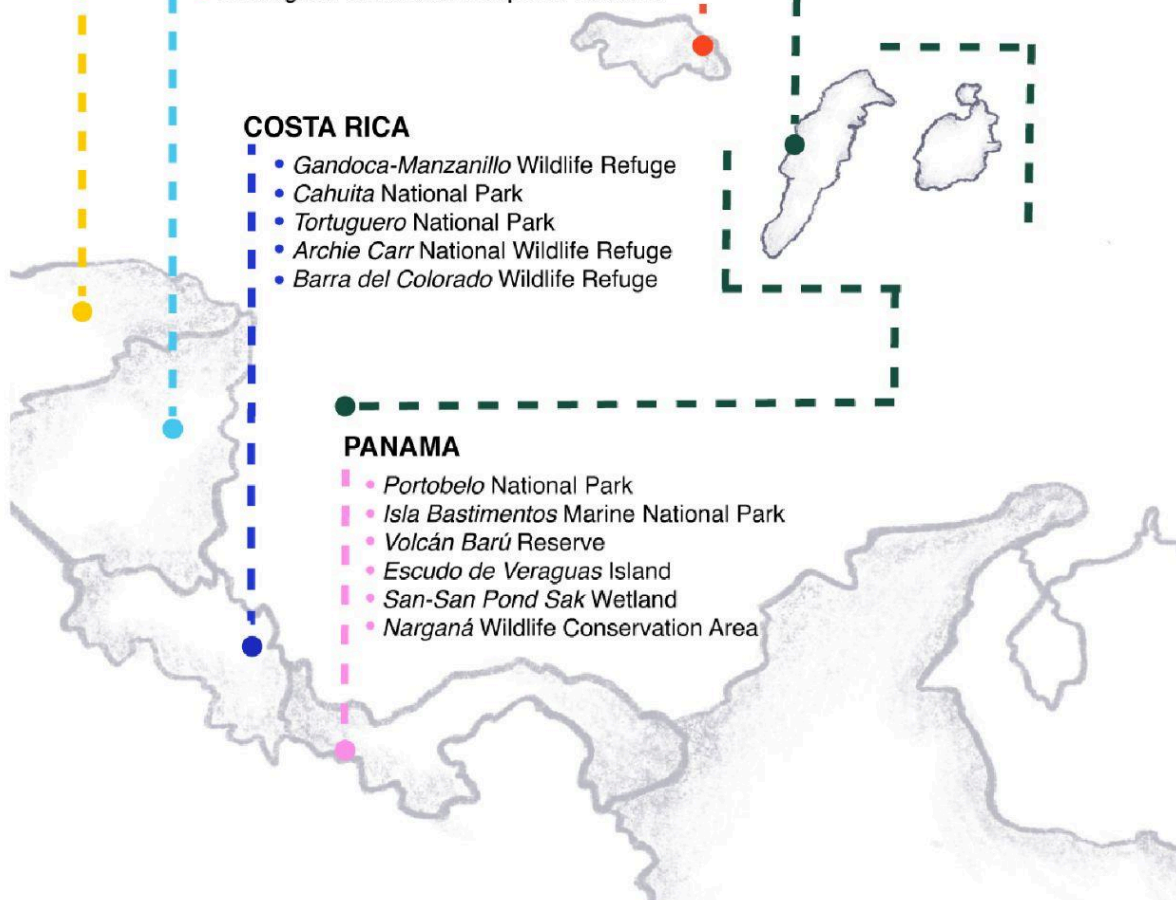
- Portobelo National Park
- Isla Bastimentos Marine National Park
- Volcán Barú Reserve
- Escudo de Veraguas Island
- San-San Pond Sak Wetland
- Narganá Wildlife Conservation Area

JAMAICA

- Palisadoes - Port Royal Protected Area
- Portland Bight Wetlands and Cays
- Black River Protected Area
- Fish Sanctuary of Pedro Bank

COLOMBIA

- Seaflower Biosphere Reserve
- Old Providence McBean Lagoon National Park
- Johnny Cay Regional Park
- Old Point Mangrove Regional Park



5. Recommendations and Proposals to STAC

Include the Initiative in technical cooperation spaces:

We recommend that the Saltwatta Roots Initiative be considered in the technical cooperation frameworks promoted by the SPAW Protocol. Such consideration could strengthen coordination with other regional conservation efforts and facilitate the exchange of knowledge, experience, and best practices in environmental governance and biological-cultural conservation.

Technical support and scientific validation:

We request that STAC accompany each country involved by reviewing and scientifically validating the marine-coastal priority areas proposed for the Transboundary Biosphere Reserve, as well as the species inhabiting these areas. This endorsement would technically support the planning and nomination process for the Reserve and its potential future designation under SPAW.

Recognize Saltwatta Roots as a strategic project:

We urge the Committee to recognize Saltwatta Roots as a pilot strategic project for advancing shared environmental governance and community participation models in the Greater Caribbean. Its biocultural, transboundary, and community-led approach offers valuable contributions toward the objectives of the SPAW Protocol and the Cartagena Convention.

Technical review of the Saltwatta Roots proposal:

We request that the Committee conduct a technical review of the Saltwatta Roots proposal regarding its alignment with regional conservation goals, ecological connectivity criteria, and the principles of the SPAW Protocol.

For more information, visit our website: www.saltwatta.org

Contact us at:

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