

Threat to Dominican Protected Areas

Dominican Protected Areas are Threatened by Congressional Action

23 April 2004 — Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic, with its 48,700 km² of land, is home to some of the most diverse habitat in the Caribbean Islands, and to extremely rich, largely endemic, and highly threatened biotic communities. These factors are very significant in placing the Caribbean Islands among the five most important global biodiversity hotspots. In 1974, an important process was initiated to establish a comprehensive system of protected areas. Today, these areas encompass 16.2 % of the land area of the country and include nearly all of the most critical ecosystems.

Throughout this period, the Dominican institutional and legal framework has evolved to the point where a General Framework Environmental Law (Law 64-00) was passed in 2000. This law reformed and modernized the environmental sector, created the Ministry for Environment and Natural Resources, and mandated the development of other environmentally relevant laws, including a new Protected Areas Law. The Ministry of Environment developed a proposed Sectorial Protected Areas Law and submitted it to the National Congress in August 2002. This proposed law included certain changes and revisions in the Dominican Protected Areas System, within the general framework of the existing system.

On 13 April 2004, the Dominican Senate read and approved the proposed Protected Areas Law with significant changes that drastically reduce and render unsustainable the Dominican System of Protected Areas, which were created through the hard work of many individuals and institutions over the past 30 years. The proposal still must be approved by the deputies and signed by the President of the Republic in order to become law.

The drastic reduction, almost destruction, of the protected areas system is supposedly based on the need to fight poverty by allowing local development in formerly protected habitats. In fact, all restrictions are removed in areas considered of potential interest for intensive beach/costal tourism and/or mining development. Besides destroying the protected areas, strong evidence exists that the so-called "developmental initiatives" sought by this proposal

do not have strong popular support, nor do they include provisions for adequate inclusion of locals in development projects.

Among other things, the proposed law removes protection from all the costal areas of Jaragua and Parque del Este national parks. Jaragua, included in the first Biosphere Reserve of the Dominican Republic, was just approved at the end of 2002 by the present administration. Regional, insular, and national resources are at risk with this initiative. Globally important sites for endangered and critically endangered ecosystems and species would disappear. These include coastal wetlands, areas important for migratory, resident, and marine birds, and globally significant sites for the critically endangered species such as the Hawksbill Sea Turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), West Indian Manatee (*Trichechus manatus*), and Rock Iguanas (*Cyclura ricordii* and *Cyclura cornuta*).

Rushing to Sell Park Beaches

6 May 2004 — Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

Four of today's Dominican newspapers, *La Informacion* from Santiago, *Diario Libre*, *Listin Diario*, and *El Caribe*, all from Sto. Domingo, featured the hurried passage of the much-debated bill that would reduce from 30 to 15% the extent of protected areas in the National Parks of the Dominican Republic.

By a vote of 93 to 14, the PRD majority, together with some members of the PRSC, rolled over some very heated opposition. If ratified in a second reading, the action would grant access for tourist development of beaches located within the National Park of the East and Jaragua National Park (in the southwest), as well as areas in the southwestern Bani dunes and along the Costa Azul Panoramic Highway in Macao in the east. The bill's provisions also authorize mining exploitation of the Pomier Caves in San Cristobal. The bill, first passed in the Senate, supposedly in the name of pragmatism, removed from the National Parks Bill practically any area that could be developed for tourism or mining. The bill also diminishes the role of the Ministry of Environment in environmental matters.

In what the *Listin Diario* calls a "huge uproar," the session attempted to debate the merits of the changes to the national parks. As soon as the PRD deputy from

Pedernales, Rafael Torres, took the floor in support of the bill, the PLD deputies and their allies from the FNP (National Progressive Force) actively challenged the proposal. They accused the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Alfredo Pacheco (PRD-National District), of being "arbitrary and abusing his powers" as he tried to push the legislation through without review by the appropriate legislative commission.

Things got so interesting that Pacheco ordered the military security detail to remove the environmental editor of *Hoy* newspaper, Domingo Abreu Collado, from the Chamber because he was filming the session. Although PLD deputies Alfredo Cruz, Abel Martinez, Clodomiro Chavez, and Minu Tavarez Mirabal opposed the steamrolling tactics and requested that the final vote be taken after the 16 May elections, the overwhelming PRD majority seconded by PRSC deputies voted down their motion and passed the proposal. While the deputies were in session, a small group of picketers protested outside the building.

The Santiago newspaper, *La Informacion*, reported that a large public protest outside of the Municipal Palace started in the evening and featured speeches by ecologists and environmental groups as well as the politicians who fought to have the bill stopped. A candlelight vigil was held into the early morning hours. No public hearings were held, nor were the different ecological groups allowed to present their case before the Chamber of Deputies.

According to *El Caribe*, the Foundation for Institutionalism and Justice (FINJUS) warned deputy Pacheco that the style of his term as president of the Chamber of Deputies should not be stained by the hurried approval and no consensus of the modifications to the law that has protected the National Park system. In what has to be seen as an ironic coincidence, even the "La Vida" section of the government-operated *Listin Diario* featured a long article on the Bay of Eagles losing its "virginity." The writer lamented that this would be the last time that she would see the "Bahia de las Aguilas" intact and pristine. The new bill also would violate an agreement signed with UNESCO that had declared the area a UNESCO biosphere reserve (see <http://www2.unesco.org/mab/br/brdir/directory/biores.asp?code=DOM+01&mode=all>).

Meanwhile, well-respected investigative journalist Ana Mitila Lora wondered in her column in *Listin Diario*, "What's the rush?"

President Mejia has been a strong supporter of the development of National Parks for tourism or mining, and has issued several decrees authorizing private companies to begin development. The only obstacle, however, has been that, at the onset of this administration, Mejia had signed Environmental Law 64-00, which established guidelines for the conservation of natural resources. The new bill that is moving ahead in Congress would resolve this impasse and enable unchecked development

of the new areas by companies chosen by the Mejia government.

Dominican Legislature Passes the Revised Protected Areas Law

13 May 2004 — Santo Domingo,
Dominican Republic

Today, the Dominican Congress approved the Protected Areas Law with significant changes that drastically reduce and render unsustainable the Dominican System of Protected Areas. The two areas that have suffered the most are Parque Nacional Jaragua and Parque Nacional del Este. The struggle by Dominican and international environmentalists continues, but is becoming more and more difficult. The bill will now pass to the President for approval — but he has stated publicly on several occasions that he favors it.

SPECIES PROFILE

Leiocephalus semilineatus

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Nine species of Hispaniolan Curly-tailed Lizards (Genus *Leiocephalus*) are currently recognized. Of these, *L. semilineatus* is the smallest, with a maximum known snout-vent length of 53 mm. In addition to its small size, this species is distinguished by the light-bordered, dark brown lateral stripes that begin as a mask and extend onto the body before fading near the hindlimbs. These fading lateral stripes are responsible for the species' scientific name.

The species is known from the Llanos de Azua and also from the Valle de Neiba of the Dominican Republic through the Cul-de-Sac plain of Haiti. The latter area is largely below sea level and is a remnant of the marine channel that once separated the North and South paleoislands that joined to form Hispaniola. An apparent hiatus in the range separates those two areas.

These little lizards are found in extremely dry habitats and may be among the most drought-tolerant of Hispaniolan lizards. They frequently occur in sympatry with *Ameiva lineolata*, a very small member of its genus and equally xerophilic (from the Greek meaning "dry-loving"). Although both species feed primarily on small arthropods, they apparently avoid most competition with one another by employing different foraging strategies. *Leiocephalus semilineatus*, like all of its congeners, is a sit-and-wait forager. Using an elevated perch on a rock or log, these lizards respond to movement by ambushing their prey. In contrast, *Ameiva lineolata*, is an active forager, constantly on the move and rooting in surface litter, while searching for anything edible. Although their diets overlap, a large proportion of that taken by *L. semilineatus* is composed of insects, such as ants and beetles, that move and attract the attention of lizards, whereas that of *A. lineolata* includes many prey items, such as pupae and larvae, that rest immobile under surface debris and would escape the notice of a sit-and-wait forager.

Like other Curlytails, *L. semilineatus* coils its tail. Unlike some members of the genus, however, the tail is never curled vertically over the lizard's body. The reasons for this behavior are unknown, although luring insect prey, communication, and confusing predators have been mentioned as possibilities.

References

- Nelson, S.E., B.L. Banbury, R.A. Sosa, and R. Powell. 2001. Natural history of *Leiocephalus semilineatus* in association with sympatric *Leiocephalus schreibersii* and *Ameiva lineolata*. *Contemporary Herpetology* 2001(1): 1–6 + 4 figs. + 2 tables (<http://www.cnah.org/ch/ch/2001/1/index.htm>).
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- Powell, R. 2002. Species Profile: *Leiocephalus personatus*. *Iguana Times* 9: 80.



An adult male *Leiocephalus semilineatus* from near Hatillo, Azua Province, Dominican Republic. Photograph by Robert Powell.