



MISSION STATEMENT

Grupo Jaragua is a non-governmental, non-profit organization founded in 1987. Its mission is to achieve the effective management of the Dominican Republic's Biodiversity Resources through research and implementation of specific projects to solve local conservation problems. Grupo Jaragua places special emphasis on regional development of Protected Areas through participatory processes at the community level, in particular in Jaragua National Park and its surrounding communities. To achieve its mission, Grupo Jaragua works in collaboration with government and non-government institutions, as well as grass-roots organizations.

PHILOSOPHY AND VALUES

We believe that it is possible to achieve at the same time the conservation and the sustainable use of biological diversity. We also believe that human wellbeing and development are basic rights that guide all our actions. Respect for human plurality is our highest priority; we try to conduct our work in harmony, acknowledging and respecting differences in views, while at the same time highlighting our common goals and the way forward towards conservation and sustainable development. We place high value in altruism, professional and human ethics, and we respect cultural differences. We strive to find consensual solutions, respect cultural differences, and encourage the widest participation of all stakeholders.

P R O F I L E

The Faces of Grupo Jaragua

Jan Ramer

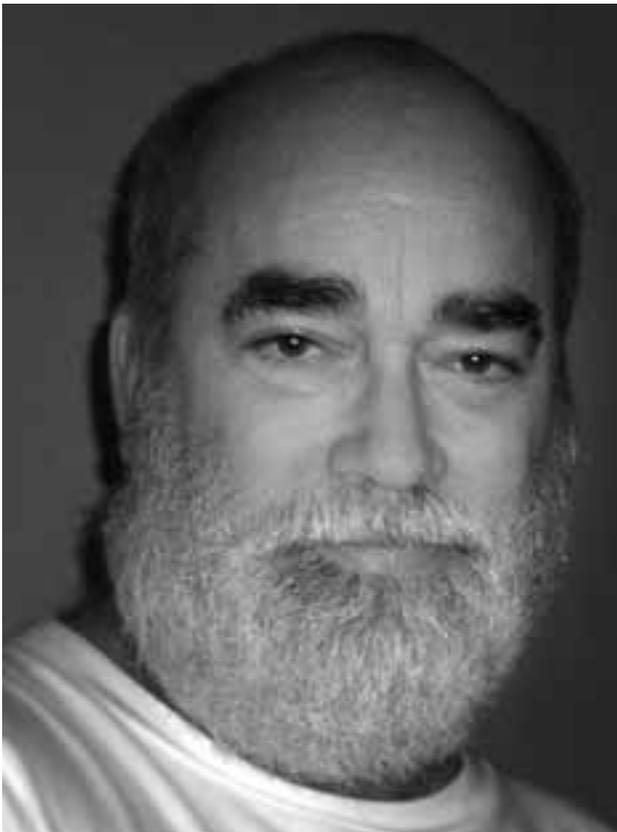
Indianapolis Zoo

Conservation is hard work. It requires patience, perseverance, teamwork, compassion, and respect, not to mention the ability to accomplish big things on a shoestring budget.

Grupo Jaragua is a non-governmental organization (NGO) in the Dominican Republic that exemplifies a conservation group that works well — sometimes under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. With a staff of only 13 dedicated people and a network of collaborators, Grupo Jaragua has worked tirelessly for the past 15 years to achieve their mission, which is the “effective management of natural resources through research and implementation of specific projects to solve local conservation problems.” They work primarily in the southwest of the country in and around Jaragua National Park, and their list of accomplishments and honors is long and varied (visit their website www.grupojaragua.org.do for a complete list). They have partnered with organizations like The Nature Conservancy, World Wildlife Fund, The Ocean Conservancy, BirdLife International, Center for International Migration and Development,



Yvonne Arias is the current president of the Grupo Jaragua.



Sixto Incháustegui was instrumental in founding both the National Museum of Natural History and the Grupo Jaragua.

Conservation International, and the MacArthur Foundation. Projects include a national campaign in bird conservation, marine conservation and research including the development of a Hawksbill Sea Turtle Education Campaign, developing a fresh-water fish inventory, and implementation of a sustainable use program in the area around Jaragua National Park. That latter includes job creation, capacity building, and public use of natural resources.

Grupo Jaragua has recently received a grant from the MacArthur Foundation for a three-year project to complete a conservation plan that will help link protected areas in the southwestern Dominican Republic through the development of biological corridors, building scientific understanding of the island's ecological communities, and enhancing local livelihoods and environmental stewardship through eco-tourism and improved agro-forestry practices. They worked with the Dominican government to establish under UNESCO the first Dominican Biosphere Reserve — Jaragua-Bahoruco-Enriquillo Biosphere Reserve. And this is just a short list!

I've had the privilege of working with three key Grupo Jaragua members on Ricord's Iguana conservation for the past five years. Together, they are the public face of the organization.

Yvonne Arias earned her master's degree in ecology and environmental conservation in 1992, and has over 20 years of experience in herpetology and ecology. Yvonne has been with Grupo Jaragua since its inception and is currently its president. She is involved with all aspects of the organization, from developing curriculum and training students in environmental conservation, to meeting with lawmakers when critical habitat is in political jeopardy. She serves on several national committees and projects involving environmental education, environmental protection, and research, and has over 30 publications on these subjects. In addition to the work she does in the Dominican Republic, she has consulted on projects in Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica.

Dr. Sixto Incháustegui has been working in the field of herpetology and environmental conservation for over 30 years, but his love affair with reptiles started at a very early age. He tells a story about his father bringing back four baby turtles from a trip to the United States when Sixto was eight years old. He enjoyed them so much that he saved all his money and ordered 10 more the next time his father returned to the States. He set up a breeding colony, which did very well, and he still has some of those turtles to this day! In one way or another, Sixto has been studying reptiles ever since. In college, he initiated an exchange of letters with Dr. Albert Schwartz, who encouraged him to host Michael Carey, one of Dr. Schwartz's students working with *Cyclura*. After that first field trip, which was his "official" introduction to the study of *Cyclura*, he was hooked. Over the years, he and Yvonne have worked with José Ottenwalder to pioneer the study of *C. ricordii* and *C. cornuta* in and around Lago Enriquillo. Sixto is a pioneer in several ways, being the first Dominican herpetologist, the first Dominican biologist who became director of the School of Biology, one of the founders of both the National Museum of Natural History in Santo Domingo and the first Dominican NGO working for environmental conservation (Grupo Jaragua). He is currently professor of biology at the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo, professor and investigator at the Instituto Tecnológico de Santo Domingo (INTEC), an invited professor at the City College of New York, to name a few of the institutions to which he contributes. Sixto's publications are too numerous to



2004 meeting with educators; back row (from left): two educators, Elizabeth Skeet, two more educators, Dr. Alfonso Ferreira; front row (from left): Gloria Santana, Josepha Castro, Quentin Bloxam, the author, Angelica Espinal, John Foster, Sixto Incháustegui, Ernst Rupp, and Rick Hudson.



Informal 2003 meeting at the Hotel Hispaniola in Santo Domingo; (from left) the author, Sixto Incháustegui, Yvonne Arias, and Ernst Rupp.

mention, and his contributions to the field of conservation are so significant that the IV Congress on Caribbean Biodiversity in January 2002 was dedicated to him.

Ernst Rupp was born in Germany, earned his Master's of Business Administration at the University of Iowa, worked for three years on assignment with the German Development Service (GDS) in Malaysia as an economic advisor to the Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority, then, in 1984, moved to the Dominican Republic on assignment with the GDS as an advisor to a farmer's cooperative. He has been working in the Dominican Republic ever since, with projects ranging from reforestation with native tree species, GDS advisor to the Dominican Wildlife Department coordinating a program to manage the buffer zone of the national park "Sierra de Neiba," with special emphasis on local participation, and investigating the distribution of bats in the Sierra de Neiba. He has been with Grupo Jaragua since 2001, promoting and coordinating the investigation of endangered species and of the threats to these species, collecting data on these species and human impact, integrating the data in a data bank, establishing the use of geographical information systems (GIS), and developing programs of conservation for these species while involving the local communities. Ernst has been concentrating his efforts on Ricord's Iguana conservation and research since 2002, and says about his work with iguanas, "Maybe I just was at the right place at the right time for once in my life."

These are three pretty amazing people. I remember being very nervous at my first meeting with Yvonne and Sixto — after all, she was the president of Grupo Jaragua and he was a living legend! I was a naïve veterinarian from Indiana who had only just started working with iguanas, had fallen in love with the Dominican Republic, and wanted to help with Ricord's Iguana conservation in any way that I could. I was prepared to be completely intimidated by these conservation icons; but, at that first meeting with Sixto, Yvonne, and Ernst, next to the pool at the Hispaniola Hotel, I met three genuine, dedicated, warm, and welcoming people, who immediately put me at ease.

Grupo Jaragua's work with iguanas could fill many pages, so I'll concentrate here on their work since the 2002 IUCN Iguana Specialist Group meeting, during which the Ricord's Iguana Species Recovery Plan (SRP) was developed. During that meeting, I enjoyed watching Yvonne, Sixto, and José Ottenwalder — the most respected environmental conservationists in the Dominican Republic — work so hard to develop an aggressive

but realistic plan to recover this critically endangered species. Since then, Grupo Jaragua has identified the two remaining populations of *C. ricordii* outside of Isla Cabritos — the Pedernales population and a population that lives along the southern shore of Lago Enriquillo. Ernst has been working hard with the Pedernales population and habitat, hiring Salvador (Miguel Mella Pérez), previously an iguana hunter, as his main guide. Needless to say, Salvador is very good. Ernst has conducted socioeconomic interviews in the area, funded in part by a grant from the Riverbanks Zoo, to determine the human impact on iguana populations. Through this ongoing work, we now know the actual status and distribution of *C. ricordii* in Pedernales Province, breeding information for both *C. ricordii* and *C. cornuta*, and the main threats to both species in this region. Ernst has worked hard to increase the local community's participation in iguana conservation, actively involving two local conservation groups: Asociacion de Guias de la Natraleza de Pedernales (AGUIPE) and Voluntarios Comunitarios de Oviedo. He is now turning his attention to the *C. ricordii* population on the southern shore of Lago Enriquillo, where he will use many of the same methods to determine status, distribution, and threats.

In July 2004, a second workshop was held to discuss progress on the 2002 SRP and to adjust goals as needed. Grupo Jaragua, ZooDom (the Dominican national zoo), and government officials met with Quentin Bloxham, Rick Hudson, and me to go over the 2002 SRP line by line, and, once again, Grupo Jaragua stepped up, volunteering to move many of the new action steps forward. During that meeting, Yvonne was very busy, spending long hours in fighting legislation that removed protected status from a beautiful stretch of sand beach in Jaragua National Park. Unfortunately, the bill passed while we were there

— but, thanks to Yvonne, significant changes were made; as of today, construction on the resort has not yet begun, and the fight continues. While Yvonne was working on this bill, Sixto and Ernst took our small party to see the habitat in Pedernales. We got to meet Salvador, viewed many active *C. ricordii* nests, and saw several adult animals. During our visit to the area, the governor of the province signed into law the first municipally protected land in Pedernales, protecting critical *C. ricordii* habitats that are not included in the nationally protected areas system — another first for Grupo Jaragua! On our way back to Oviedo, Sixto took us briefly across the border into a Haitian town — his interests include all of Hispaniola. We saw no iguanas, but the cultural differences were interesting to see, and the rum was good...

As if fighting environmentally unsound laws, establishing protected areas, and participating in a Species Recovery Plan meeting were not enough, Yvonne and Sixto treated us to a wonderful Dominican lunch at their home in Oviedo. We ate delicious food prepared by Yvonne, under the shade of native trees purposely planted in their back yard, and watched the tanks of native fish that Sixto has been breeding over the years — all in all a very special afternoon!

The bottom line here is that Sixto, Yvonne, and Ernst, and all of the other members of Grupo Jaragua, are among the most dedicated environmental conservationists in the Caribbean and maybe even the entire world. Their stated values include altruism, professional and human ethics, and respect for cultural differences. They strive to find consensual solutions and encourage the widest participation of all stakeholders. They live these values. I have truly enjoyed working with these three individuals over the past five years, and I am honored to call them my friends.



This meeting was held on 26 August of this year in Fondo Paradí, a newly created ecotourism venue in Jaragua National Park that is devoted primarily to birdwatching. Present were rangers of the National Park, the administrator of the park, the mayor of Oviedo, commanders of the Armed Forces, Oviedo Police Department, and the marine base in Cabo Rojo, and representatives of Grupo Jaragua. Participants in the meeting discussed problems and possible solutions and pledged closer coordination between the various entities represented. The meeting was deemed an overwhelming success.