

LATIN AMERICA / CARIBBEAN

COIBA NATIONAL PARK

PANAMA



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## WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION – IUCN TECHNICAL EVALUATION

### COIBA NATIONAL PARK (PANAMA) ID N° 1138 Bis

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#### Background note:

Coiba National Park was nominated for inscription on the World Heritage List in 2003 on the basis of natural criteria (ii), (iii) and (iv). Coiba National Park is located in the Gulf of Chiriquí, south-west of the Pacific Coast of Panama, in the Central Pacific Ocean. The park protects Coiba Island and 38 smaller islands and islets. The nominated property is well known for its marine biodiversity and for protecting remaining areas of Pacific tropical moist forest of insular character on the Central American Pacific coast.

IUCN considered in its original evaluation report provided to the 28th session of the World Heritage Committee in June 2004 (document WHC-04/28.COM/INF.14B), that the nominated property as presented did not meet any of the natural criteria. However, IUCN recommended that a revised nomination be submitted once legal protection for the property was provided under national law and the boundaries of the property were substantially expanded to provide greater coverage of the key marine and coastal areas of the Gulf of Chiriquí.

Additional information provided by the State Party in June 2004, which was not available at the time of preparing the nomination or evaluation report, confirms the scientific importance of the property but also represents a constructive response to the recommendations made by IUCN in its evaluation. The State Party reported at that time that actions had already been taken by the State Party to: (a) provide legal protection to the property under national law; and (b) expand the property to provide greater coverage of the Gulf of Chiriquí. IUCN congratulated the State Party for these actions and considered that, based on this new information; an extended property could have potential to meet natural criteria (ii) and (iv).

Based on this recommendation the World Heritage Committee, at its 28<sup>th</sup> session (decision 28 COM/14B.10), decided to:

1. *Defer the nomination of Coiba National Park, Panama, until the new proposed national law establishing the National Park is approved by the President of Panama and a revised, expanded nomination is submitted for examination;*
2. *Encourage the State Party to continue its participation in the development of the proposed Cocos Islands – Galapagos Marine Biological Corridor where Coiba National Park can play an important role as a stepping-stone core area for marine conservation.*

#### 1. NEW INFORMATION

On 19 October 2004 IUCN received from the World Heritage Centre a copy of National Law No. 44, signed by the Legislative Assembly of the Republic of Panama

on 26 July 2004, establishing Coiba National Park (in line with IUCN Category II Protected Area) and a Special Zone of Marine Protection within the Gulf of Chiriquí. The new law established the boundaries of the National Park and its Zone of Marine Protection, as well as the protection and management regulations for both areas. The Coiba National Park encompasses over 270,125 ha of which 216,500 ha are marine and 53,625ha are insular, including Coiba Island and 38 smaller islands. The Special Zone of Marine Protection is included as a buffer zone to the National Park and encompasses an area of 160,700 ha, which incorporates Montuosa Island, an island of 136 ha located 21.3 nautical miles to the West of Coiba Island, and Hannibal Bank, located 12.6 nautical miles to the West of Coiba Island, which is an underwater seamount known for its high marine productivity.

In the National Park, activities such as human settlements (except for those associated to the Park's administration), infrastructure development, agriculture, forest cutting and exploration and exploitation of mineral and oil resources are strictly forbidden. Traditional fishing would be only allowed and regulated through provisions of the Park's Management Plan. In the Special Zone of Marine Protection, commercial fisheries activities, including use of long-lines and nylon gill nets, are prohibited. The Law calls for drafting of a revised Management Plan, an activity that has already started, and also stipulates that activities for the protection and sustainable use of marine resources in the Special Zone of Marine Protection should be included in the revised Management Plan so as to guide the integrated and coordinated management of the entire area. Furthermore the Law established a Trust Fund as a mechanism to ensure the sustainable financing of Coiba National Park.

On 20 January 2005, IUCN received a revised nomination document for the Coiba National Park. This revised nomination includes the following:

- Revised boundaries for the nominated property including Coiba National Park as the core area of the property and the Special Zone of Marine Protection as its buffer zone, with a total extension of 430,825ha, from which 53,761ha are terrestrial (an increment of 0.25% with respect of the original nomination) and 377,064ha are marine (an increment of 74.2% with respect of the original nomination);
- A comprehensive comparative analysis with similar properties already inscribed on the World Heritage List and other insular and marine properties that have been identified as meriting consideration for World Heritage nomination;
- A detailed justification for inscription including recent results of scientific research on the values of the

nominated property, including an assessment of the significance of the Special Zone of Marine Protection for conserving the marine ecosystems of the Gulf of Chiriquí; and

- Updated information on the State of Conservation of the nominated property, particularly noting progress towards the preparation of a revised Management Plan for the property as required under the new Law No. 44. This work will be supported by a number of NGOs particularly by the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) through funding provided by the Eastern Tropical Pacific Seascape Project. Preparation of the revised management plan is receiving the highest priority by the government and all NGOs working in this area. The development of explicit regulations for artisanal fishing in the Coiba National Park and the Special Zone of Marine Protection will ensure effective protection of the park's marine resources. It is anticipated that these regulations will be drafted in early 2005 by the Directive Council created by the Law No. 44 to oversee and guide the management of the property. These regulations will be included in the revised Management Plan, as well as the establishment of zones that will indicate where and how fishing is permitted. The Management Plan will also provide regulations on the development of tourism activities in the property.

## 2. IUCN COMMENTS ON NEW INFORMATION

The approval of National Law No. 44 establishing Coiba National Park and a Special Zone of Marine Protection within the Gulf of Chiriquí, and the revised nomination provided by the State Party, adequately address all the key concerns noted in the IUCN 2004 evaluation report (WHC-04/28.COM/INF.14B) on the original nomination of Coiba National Park. It should be noted that the Coiba National Park, combined with the Special Zone of Marine Protection, now comprises 90% of the islands and 60% of the edge of the continental shelf within the Gulf of Chiriquí. The overall size of the nominated property of 430,825ha covers almost half of the entire Gulf of Chiriquí.

IUCN emphasises, in addition to comments made in its previous report on issues of integrity, that commercial fishing within the property requires very careful management and the State Party should ensure that a clear fisheries management monitoring system is put in place.

### 2.1 Application of criteria / Statement of Significance

Coiba National Park has been nominated under natural criteria (ii), (iii) and (iv).

#### Criterion (ii): Ecological processes

The additional information provided in the revised nomination notes that, despite the short time of isolation of the islands of the Gulf of Chiriquí (most of which are incorporated in the nominated property) on an evolutionary timeframe, new species are being formed, which is evident from the levels of endemism reported

for many groups (mammals, birds, plants), making the nominated property an outstanding natural laboratory for scientific research. Furthermore the Eastern Pacific reefs such as those in the nominated property are characterized by complex biological interactions of their inhabitants and provide a key ecological link in the Tropical Eastern Pacific for the transit and survival of numerous pelagic fish as well as marine mammals. IUCN therefore considers that the nominated property meets this criterion.

#### Criterion (iii): Superlative natural phenomena or natural beauty and aesthetic importance

While the revised nomination makes again the case for criterion (iii) the additional information provided does not substantially differ from that included in the original nomination. IUCN reiterates that there are a number of other islands in the Pacific, the Caribbean and elsewhere that have a similar appearance to that of the terrestrial and marine components of the nominated property. IUCN therefore considers that the nominated property does not meet this criterion.

#### Criterion (iv): Biodiversity and threatened species

The additional information provided in the revised nomination clearly demonstrates that the forests of Coiba Island are fundamentally different than those of the Darién Province and possess a high variety of endemic birds, mammals and plants when compared to this region. Coiba Island also serves as the last refuge for a number of threatened species that have largely disappeared from the rest of Panama, such as the Crested Eagle and the Scarlet Macaw. Furthermore the marine ecosystems within the nominated property are repositories of extraordinary biodiversity conditioned to the ability of the Gulf of Chiriquí to buffer against temperature extremes associated to El Niño/Southern Oscillation (ENSO) phenomenon. The nominated property includes 760 species of marine fishes, 33 species of sharks and 20 species of cetaceans. The islands within the nominated property are the only group of inshore islands in the tropical eastern Pacific that have significant populations of trans-Pacific fishes, namely, Indo-Pacific species that have established themselves in the eastern Pacific. IUCN considers that the nominated property meets this criterion.

With the addition of the Special Zone of Marine Protection in the nominated property, the State Party should consider modifying the name of the property to avoid confusion over the boundaries.

## 3. DRAFT DECISION

IUCN recommends that the Committee adopt the following draft decision:

*The World Heritage Committee,*

1. Having examined Document WHC-05/29.COM/8B
2. Recalling its Decision 28COM/14B.10
3. Commends the State Party, and the NGOs supporting conservation efforts in Coiba National Park, for their excellent response to address the key issues requested by the Committee at its 28<sup>th</sup> session, in

*particular for the adoption of National Law No. 44 which established Coiba National Park and its Special Zone of Marine Protection.*

4. *Inscribes Coiba National Park and its Special Zone of Marine Protection, Panama, on the World Heritage List under natural criteria (ii) and (iv).*

**Criterion (ii):** *Despite the short time of isolation of the islands of the Gulf of Chiriquí on an evolutionary timeframe, new species are being formed, which is evident from the levels of endemism reported for many groups (mammals, birds, plants), making the property an outstanding natural laboratory for scientific research. Furthermore the Eastern Pacific reefs, such as those within the property, are characterized by complex biological interactions of their inhabitants and provide a key ecological link in the Tropical Eastern Pacific for the transit and survival of numerous pelagic fish as well as marine mammals.*

**Criterion (iv):** *The forests of Coiba Island possess a high variety of endemic birds, mammals and plants. Coiba Island also serves as the last refuge for a number of threatened species that have largely disappeared from the rest of Panama, such as the Crested Eagle and the Scarlet Macaw. Furthermore the marine ecosystems within the property are repositories of extraordinary biodiversity conditioned to the ability of the Gulf of Chiriquí to buffer against temperature extremes associated to El Niño/Southern Oscillation (ENSO) phenomenon. The property includes 760 species of marine fishes, 33 species of sharks and 20 species of cetaceans. The islands within the property are the only group of inshore islands in the tropical eastern Pacific that have significant populations of trans-Pacific fishes, namely, Indo-Pacific species that have established themselves in the eastern Pacific.*

5. *Requests the State Party to consider options to expedite the preparation, adoption and further implementation of the revised Management Plan for the property, and to very carefully control and monitor fisheries management. The State Party may wish to consider requesting international assistance under the World Heritage Fund to support the effective implementation of this important task.*
6. *Requests the State Party to confirm the name of the property to the World Heritage Centre as soon as possible.*

Map 1: General location of nominated property



Map 2: Boundaries of nominated property

