

OPENING PUBLIC DATABASES ON VENEZUELAN BIODIVERSITY TO GREATER PARTICIPATION BY THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

The Venezuelan government recently took an important step with the creation of two new websites: the *System of National Indicators and Statistics for Environmental Management* (SIENAGA; www.minamb.gob.ve/files/planificacion-y-presupuesto/IndicadoresAmbientales.htm) and the *Venezuelan Information System on Biological Diversity* (SVIDB; diversidadbiologica.reacciun.ve). For the first time, they offer easy and open access to official documents that were previously unavailable or of limited distribution. With these initiatives, Venezuela joins the group of other Latin American countries with similar web portals, such as Chile (www.sinia.cl), Colombia (www.humboldt.org.co), Ecuador (www.ambiente.gob.ec) and Mexico (www.conabio.gob.mx).

Examination of the information on biodiversity in SIENAGA and SVIDB shows that they clearly cover the range of fundamental variables necessary for planning the conservation and sustainable use of our species and ecosystems. However, they do not reflect the richness of information available, and some of the data presented are out of date. For example, although there is an extensive tradition of compiling fishery statistics that goes back at least to the 1970s, the time series reported in SIENAGA covers only 2000-2007. Likewise, hundreds of experts during the last 20 years have worked to systematize data on Venezuelan threatened animals, plants and ecosystems, but their work is ignored in SIENAGA and SVIDB. Instead, they present incomplete lists, taken from international organizations and a governmental decree from 1996, respectively. An additional problem are their lists of species for sustainable use, species with impact on human health, and species subjected to illegal trade: no legal or scientific basis for their selection is given,

and their presence on the website gives the mistaken impression that they are official lists. Finally, about two thirds of the national parks and natural monuments included in the data base lack the downloadable digital geographical files that accompany their description, thus limiting their usefulness for supporting scientific research.

Scientists based in governmental agencies, academic, civil society and the private sector have made significant contributions to knowledge of Venezuelan biodiversity. Hundreds of publications and databases are available, many of them freely accessible on the Internet. The scientific community has the talent, the knowledge, the data, and the willingness to support the management of information on Venezuelan biodiversity. The government has within its reach a rich and mature intellectual resource that has not been taken advantage of to date.

We imagine a future in which SIENAGA and SVIDB are open platforms that facilitate information exchange and provide access to the broad and extensive portfolio of scientific and popular publications on Venezuelan biodiversity, including official publications as well as those produced by other stakeholders in biodiversity conservation. We imagine a future where Venezuelan biodiversity websites are models of participatory and shared management, serving as an example to other nations interested in implementing similar information systems. We imagine a future in which decisions on the conservation and management of Venezuelan species and ecosystems are based on the best and more recent scientific knowledge available. We, as undoubtedly the majority of our colleagues, are prepared to help make this future a reality.

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