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The New York Botanical Garden and the Center for International Policy Applaud U.S.-Cuba Agreement to Improve Cooperation on Environmental Issues

Advocacy by NGOs, Including the Botanical Garden and the Center, Led to Accord to Address Shared Conservation and Biodiversity Challenges

Bronx, NY—The New York Botanical Garden and the Center for International Policy welcome the landmark agreement by the governments of the United States and Cuba to dramatically increase the cooperation by the two countries on shared environmental issues.

The agreement, signed yesterday in Washington, D. C., will streamline the process for U. S. and Cuban scientists to work together toward the goal of protecting the biological resources of both countries. Under the terms of the accord, travel to Cuba for environmental projects will be eased, as will restrictions on funding such projects and shipping research equipment.

The accord is the result of many years of advocacy efforts by The New York Botanical Garden (NYBG), the Center for International Policy (CIP), other research institutions and conservation nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and attorney/advocate Robert Muse.

“The winner from this agreement is the biodiversity shared between Cuba and the U.S.,” said Brian Boom, Ph.D., Vice President for Conservation Strategy at The New York Botanical Garden. “The future of our nations’ mutual biological heritage now has a bilateral framework for conservation and sustainable development. Congratulations to our governments’ leaders for their environmental acumen and diplomatic courage.”

“We couldn’t be more pleased that the Department of State concluded the agreement,” said Elizabeth Newhouse, Director of the Center for International Policy’s Cuba Project. “Even if the next president does not share President Obama’s desire to go forward with normalized relations with Cuba, yesterday’s agreement puts bilateral environmental cooperation on a secure and lasting footing.”

“The agreement is a heartening instance of the U.S. government listening to NGOs, who spoke from a real desire to succeed in the important work they are doing in Cuba,” said Robert Muse. “The State Department is to be fulsomely commended for this.”

The effort by the coalition of advocacy groups began in December 2008 with a letter to then-President-elect Obama to ask that he make scientific exchanges with Cuba easier in order to confront shared, growing environmental threats. Changes in visa and licensing policies followed.

However, the process for carrying out environmental projects with Cuba remained daunting. In 2012, the coalition of non-governmental groups launched an initiative to urge the U.S. to execute a joint declaration with Cuba to facilitate the flow of scientific information and the development of projects to protect the environment. The group followed up with a detailed letter to President Obama in February 2013, making the case for an environmental-protection agreement with Cuba.

Signatories included, in addition to CIP, NYBG and Robert Muse, the CEOs of the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Museum of Natural History, the Ocean Foundation, the Sea to Shore Alliance, the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies, the Tinker Foundation, the Nature Conservancy, the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, and the World Wildlife Fund. Dan Whittle of EDF and David Guggenheim, the founder of Ocean Doctor, contributed greatly to the initiative.

Dr. Boom surveyed the shared environmental challenges both countries face in a 2012 paper in the scientific journal *Science & Diplomacy*. Those challenges include the impact of natural and man-made disasters such as hurricanes and oil leaks and multiple threats to coral reefs, seagrass beds, mangrove forests, and other important ecosystems.

About The New York Botanical Garden

The New York Botanical Garden is a museum of plants, an educational institution, and a scientific research organization. Founded in 1891, the Botanical Garden is one of the world's preeminent centers for studying plants at all levels, from the whole organism down to its DNA. Garden scientists conduct fundamental research on plants and fungi globally, as well as on the many relationships between plants and people. A National Historic Landmark, the Garden's 250-acre site is one of the greatest botanical gardens in the world and the largest in any city in the United States, distinguished by the beauty of its diverse landscape and extensive collections and gardens, as well as by the scope and excellence of its programs in horticulture, education, and science. Learn more: nybg.org

About the Center for International Policy

The Center for International Policy promotes foreign policy based on international cooperation, demilitarization and respect for human rights. Through research, education and direct public advocacy, CIP defines and puts into practice a more sympathetic, farsighted and non-militaristic approach to the developing world.

The New York Botanical Garden, 2900 Southern Boulevard, Bronx, New York 10458

The New York Botanical Garden is located on property owned in full by the City of New York, and its operation is made possible in part by public funds provided through the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. A portion of the Garden's general operating funds is provided by The New York City Council and The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. The Bronx Borough President and Bronx elected representatives in the City Council and State Legislature provide leadership funding.

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