

Project Update: December 2008

Jaime Bolaños and his team continued their support of community activities related to dolphin-watching in Ocumare de la Costa de Oro, within the Venezuelan state of Aragua. As a result, commercial offerings of dolphin-watching trips by fishermen and community leaders have increased in a responsible manner in the Bay of Cata, State of Aragua. Training seminars (educational outreach) on responsible dolphin-watching were presented in the cities of Maracay (State of Aragua), Mérida (State of Mérida), Puerto Concha (State of Zulia) and Margarita Island (State of Nueva Esparta). Attendance included at least 110 fishermen, boat drivers, journalists, tourism guides, students, and professionals on Biology and Tourism in four regions where dolphin-watching trips have been offered regularly during the past 25-30 years. In the absence of government regulations, guidelines were provided for tour operators to learn how to operate in accordance with ecotourism premises.

As a result of sensitizing activities, the Ministry of Tourism's INATUR invited one of the team members - Auristela Villarroel - as a special lecturer during the III International Congress on Tourism in Venezuela (<http://www.fitven.com.ve/> and <http://www.mintur.gob.ve>). This is the most important tourism meeting in Venezuela; governmental agencies, tour operators, and invited participants exchange experiences and promote Venezuela as a tourism destination at a global level. At this meeting, Auristela presented a lecture on the importance of dolphin-watching in increasing awareness regarding ecotourism in Venezuela, as part of a series of lectures on "New Trends on Tourism in Venezuela."

Team member biologists Olga Lucía Herrera and María Gabriela Silva attended the VIII Meeting of the Latin America Society of Aquatic Mammal Specialists (SOLAMAC) held in Montevideo, Uruguay, 13-17 October 2008. At this meeting, Olga and María Gabriela presented the scientific results of their field surveys on abundance and distribution, as well as interactions between dolphins and boats in our study area. This dissemination of scientific information is the foundation for empowering local communities to support responsible ecotourism.

Field surveys also helped to improve the scientific information on the bio-ecological aspects of dolphins in the State of Aragua. The photo-identification catalogue has improved remarkably. Photographs taken during these surveys have yielded important information on several skin disorders and trauma of Atlantic spotted and bottlenose dolphins (*Stenella frontalis* and *Tursiops truncatus*, respectively) and has confirmed residence patterns of a proportion of the dolphin populations here.

This year, Jaime was awarded with the distinction of "Rostros de la Ciencia del Estado Aragua" (http://rostrosdelaciencia.fundacite.arg.gov.ve/Bio_Jaime_Bolanos.html), an award granted by Fundacite Aragua –(<http://www.fundacite.arg.gov.ve>; the Governmental Agency for Science and Technology- to scientists and inventors who have remarkably contributed to the development of science and technology in the State of Aragua.