

American Association for the Advancement of Science,
American Museum of Natural History, Center for International Policy,
Environmental Defense Fund, Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies,
The Nature Conservancy, The New York Botanical Garden,
The Ocean Foundation, Sea to Shore Alliance, The Tinker Foundation,
U.S. National Academy of Sciences, World Wildlife Fund

February 14, 2013

The Honorable Barack H. Obama
President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

We write to thank you for your efforts since 2009 to ease scientific exchange and environmental cooperation between the United States and Cuba—and to respectfully ask you to build on this progress by pursuing an agreement with Cuba to streamline the process for U.S. and Cuban scientists to work together. We understand that Cuba is amenable to such an agreement and has conveyed as much to representatives of the U.S. government. To the same end of protecting the biological resources of both countries, we ask that the United States initiate a dialogue with Cuba to further expand cooperation on our wide range of common environmental issues.

In December 2008, a number of scientific, conservation, and academic institutions (including many of the signatories below) wrote asking you to make scientific exchanges with Cuba easier in order to confront the growing environmental threats. We described then how vitally important the well-being of Cuba's environment is to the United States. Preserving the island's biodiversity critically affects the fishing economies in the southern United States, the deepwater coral ecosystem that extends to North Carolina, the migration of birds and sea turtles, and the forests that help sustain our American biota.

Your administration has undertaken a number of highly fruitful measures. Changes in visa and licensing policies have expanded the number of exchanges and projects between U.S. non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and researchers, resource managers, and conservation organizations in Cuba. These include a partnership among the Environmental Defense Fund and the Cuban Center for Marine Research on the status of migratory shark populations in the Gulf of Mexico; The New York Botanical Garden's work with Cuban biologists to identify and assess Cuba's most vulnerable plant species; Sea to Shore Alliance's joint research with the University of Havana on endangered manatees in Cuba and the United States; the Wildlife Conservation Society's work with Cuban park officials on wetlands and endangered species; and Environmental Defense Fund's and The Nature Conservancy's initiative with Cuban park managers and biologists to study and preserve marine and coastal biodiversity in both countries.

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Your policies have also benefited the work of the Tri-National Initiative on Marine Sciences and Conservation in the Gulf of Mexico and Western Caribbean (organized in 2007 by the Center for International Policy, The Ocean Foundation, and the Cuban Ministry of Science, Technology, and Environment). Participating scientists have been able to communicate more freely and frequently and, since 2009, have held a series of five unprecedented meetings and field visits in Havana, Mexico, and Florida.

Finally, American environmentalists, oil industry safety experts, and a lawyer familiar with U.S. embargo regulations visited Cuba to assess Cuban oil drilling, and discuss Cuba's readiness to deal with potential environmental and safety threats. Those exchanges between American and Cuban experts have directly contributed to stronger environmental regulations in Cuba and to constructive discussions among Cuba, the United States, and other countries in the region. The exchanges have also produced detailed recommendations for proactive regulatory measures the U.S. government should implement now to ensure that our waters and shorelines are protected in the event of a Cuban spill. These include authorizing the U.S. private sector to respond quickly to an oil spill off Cuba's coast.

Despite the successes, however, the process for carrying out environmental projects with Cuba remains daunting. The problems are especially acute for NGOs that have little or no track record of working in Cuba. But even U.S.-based NGOs with OFAC licenses and years of experience are thwarted by administrative rules and procedures. These impediments come from rules and requirements in both countries. In the United States the principal issues are as follows:

- 1) **Licenses for People to Travel to Cuba for Environmental Purposes.** While options for licenses from OFAC have increased, the regulations are unevenly interpreted and cause considerable confusion. Also, an unpredictable length of time is required to get a decision, ranging from a month to a year, making it difficult to arrange and plan for collaborative projects.
- 2) **Licenses for Research Equipment.** Environmental research requires specialized equipment, ranging from hand-held GPS units to deepwater submersibles. Obtaining permits for shipping such equipment – used during the course of the research – from the U.S. Department of Commerce can be extremely complicated and slow, with little certainty that permits will be granted.
- 3) **Funding.** Although Cuba has an excellent cadre of environmental professionals, Cuban government funding for infrastructure, research, training, and monitoring of projects of shared bilateral concern is inadequate.

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Funds from U.S. foundations and environmental groups that could potentially go toward these projects are considerable, but they are severely limited by OFAC restrictions.

In Cuba, too, bureaucratic requirements and procedures can delay or impede project approvals, visas, and permits. Approvals must come from an array of Cuban agencies and from various levels within each, making the process complex, non-linear, and slow. Once projects and visas are approved, researchers must seek permits for fieldwork, a process with stringent requirements that also can take a lot of time. Cuban government officials have acknowledged these problems and have pledged to take steps to address them.

The Cuban government has indicated its willingness to enter into an agreement with the United States that would allow scientists and environmentalists of both countries to freely travel, to jointly conduct research, and to work on approved projects. Ideally such an agreement would define and streamline the licensing and approval process on both sides; it would expedite research visas for multiple entries into Cuba; and it would hasten permits for all the components of an approved project.

The proposed agreement does not preclude the need for a dialogue between the U.S. and Cuba on how to work together on shared environmental issues. Such a dialogue could identify steps each country could take, individually or in tandem, to further facilitate scientific exchange, cooperation, and technology transfer. The United States and Cuba already have a history of working together on selected issues of mutual interest, like hurricane preparation and response. And, as already noted, diplomats from both countries are now engaged in productive talks on offshore oil drilling. A new dialogue on environmental and natural resources could be patterned after these efforts.

The proposed agreement and dialogue would go far to conserve the shared biological resources of the United States and Cuba by confirming both countries' commitment to the vital task of managing them. This is an urgent matter, and we urgently, respectfully, ask that you give it your support.

Sincerely,



Alan I. Leshner, CEO
American Association for the
Advancement of Science



Michael J. Novacek, Senior Vice
President and Provost of Science
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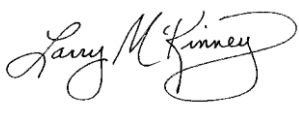
Mark Spalding, President
The Ocean Foundation



Fred Krupp, President
Environmental Defense Fund



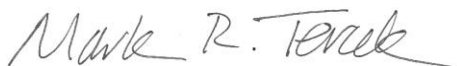
James Powell, Executive Director
Sea to Shore Alliance



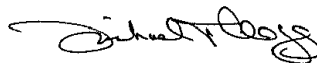
Larry McKinney, Executive Director
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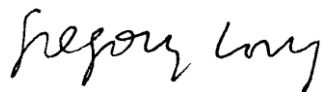
Renate Rennie, Chairman and President
The Tinker Foundation



Mark Tercek, President and CEO
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