

**U.S. Coral Reef Task Force
Award Recipients
San Juan, Puerto Rico 2009**

OUTSTANDING PUBLIC AWARENESS AND EDUCATION

María Falcón and her Geoambiente del Caribe Inc. group

María Falcón, a Puerto Rico native, established GeoAmbiente del Caribe, a production house devoted to the realization of environmental, social and educational documentaries and projects. In 2001, Maria produced “GeoAmbiente,” the only nature and environmental weekly TV program in Puerto Rico. To date there are more than 200 episodes featuring research and investigations on coastal ecosystems, coral bleaching, bends disease, coastal erosion, water quality and sustainable developments, and more. Overall, “GeoAmbiente” provides an outlet for the scientific community to showcase projects and research to the public, and encourages scientists, government, community groups and students to discuss environmental issues and propose solutions. For this reason, GeoAmbiente has been instrumental for the preservation of coastal land and marine ecosystems.

Maria is no stranger to receiving awards for her work. She has received 6 Emmy Awards, the US Environmental Agency “Excellence Award,” US Forest Service “Centennial Award,” and NOAA’s “Environmental Hero Award,” among others.

San Juan Bay Estuary Program

In April of 2009, the San Juan Bay Estuary Program launched its Coral Reefs Public Awareness Campaign, following the development of their first Underwater Interpretative Coral Trail. A total of two hundred and forty five (245) artificial reef structures known as Tainoreefs© were deployed in the northern coast of the San Juan Metropolitan Area. The project took place after several years of planning and consulting with local and federal agencies, as well as meetings with the Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) of the organization.

As part of the project, an artificial reef trail was installed in the Condado Lagoon creating a near shore snorkeling interpretative trail to be used as an ecotourism attraction in the city. This lagoon is located in a key urban axis, near all major hotels of San Juan and on the main gateway to Old San Juan. The coral reef trail increased the coral reef fish population and diversity of the area by providing shelter and feeding zones. Moreover, the modules provide an underwater corridor connecting the fragmented seagrass parches and the offshore coral communities of the lagoon.

San Juan Bay Estuary Program created an integrated marketing communications for the initiative. Following a main message and a visual language focused on coral reefs and underwater footage, the public awareness project includes an educational exhibit comprised of six panels permanently located a few feet from the coral reef trail; a large-scale photo exhibit of coral reefs; one 10-minutes documentary; two (2) TV ads; three (3) newspaper ads; several

premiums (coolers, plastic pouches for boat trips, caps and others), and a redesigned website visually focused on coral reefs and in underwater species. The final deployment was made on April of 2009 on a press conference with over twenty (20) reporters from all local media.

Currently, local media of Puerto Rico and US-based Latino media corporations, such as Univision, are placing the coral reefs public service media campaign created by the San Juan Bay Estuary Program to promote the use of its artificial reef trail. Also, the campaign includes ads to increase public awareness on the importance and protection of coral reefs. The documentary created for this outreach initiative is currently being presented on over one hundred (100) bank branches of the Banco Popular de Puerto Rico, the largest bank of the Island. The documentary is also being distributed in schools during current semester calendar.

OUTSTANDING COMMUNITY LEVEL PARTICIPATION

The Virgin Islands Resource Conservation and Development (VI RC&D) Council, Inc.

The Virgin Islands Resource Conservation and Development (VI RC&D) Council, Inc. is an independent, locally-administered, non-profit organization whose mission is to enhance the quality of life for the people of the Virgin Islands through the conservation of natural and cultural resources, and the stimulation of growth and development. VI RC&D effectively develops partnerships with governmental, non-governmental and private organizations. These alliances provide the necessary tools and resources that allow VI RC&D to accomplish its goals and objectives of resource conservation and community development. VI RC&D has a long history of collaboration to implement a number of projects and programs that further the protection of VI coral reef ecosystems including, but not limited to: development of a watershed management plan for Fish Bay, St. John; development of BMPs and an implementation plan to mitigate erosion from East End Bay into the St. Croix East End Marine Park; coordination of the annual VI Nonpoint Source Pollution Conference; development and installation of signage for the St. Croix East End Marine Park; and facilitation of the St. Croix IYOR, Reef Jam, and Friends of the St. Croix East End Marine Park initiatives. Most recently, VI RC&D was awarded \$2.7M in federal funding for habitat restoration to implement watershed restoration activities in three priority VI watersheds in order to improve the health of coastal habitats including coral reefs.

Kathy Valentine Hall and La Liga Ecológica Puertorriqueña del Noroeste, Inc.

Kathy Valentine Hall is instrumental in the outstanding efforts of La Liga Ecologica. Kathy has lead volunteers on coral cover and health surveys, lead efforts to establish marine reserves, and more.

La Liga Ecológica, in conjunction with other local community groups, has produced bilingual coral reef educational flyers and posters, which were distributed to areas all over Puerto Rico, including guesthouses, water-sport shops, and schools. They have also been involved in coral

bleaching surveys, field trips to observe coral spawning, beach/marine cleanups, commenting at public hearings for coastal developments, water quality testing, sewage treatment plant waivers, teaching children how to snorkel correctly over the reef, presentations about coral biology and coral regulations, and writing about how to reduce global warming.

Dr. Samuel Suleiman

Dr. Suleiman has been instrumental in raising environmental awareness among the community of students at the University of Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras. In addition, his outstanding work with coral reef transect and transplantation projects has earned him high regard among conservationists in Puerto Rico.

OUTSTANDING SCIENTIFIC ADVANCEMENT AND KNOWLEDGE

Dr. Jorge Garcia Sais

Dr. García has been instrumental in providing data on the status of corals, major reef fishes and coral reef megabenthic organisms. In 1999, Dr. Jorge R. García Sais established a baseline characterization of the coral reef communities at Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DNER) identified priority natural reserves. Through his consistent efforts, he alerted the DNER and documented bleaching events followed by disease outbreaks that decimated coral reefs.

Dr. García has also provided quantitative and qualitative characterization of the mesophotic reef habitats and associated communities from Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands, complementing ongoing programs of coral reef community characterizations and monitoring sponsored by NOAA through the DNER and the USVI Division of Coastal Zone Management. Through his continuous work, the DNER has been able to make informed management decisions. His work contributed to the ongoing NOAA-DNER sponsored research on habitat utilization by coral reef fish populations in neritic sections of the insular shelf. This has contributed to our present understanding of the role of the mesophotic habitats on the life cycles of reef fish populations, with particular interest in the commercially important species, such as the tiger grouper, *Mycteroperca tigris* off southeast Vieques. His research also highlighted the importance of these mesophotic reef habitats in facing the effects of climate change on shallower reefs. In particular, Dr. García Sais' assertion on the importance of the deep boulder star coral community as a refuge for the shallow water reef fish communities affected by declining live coral cover prompted the DNER to promote more research and protection on this topic.