



U.S. DEPARTMENT
OF THE INTERIOR
INTERNATIONAL TECHNICAL
ASSISTANCE PROGRAM



DOI Technical Experts in Latin America

DOI-ITAP

Sharing & Learning

Interview with Sarita Valentin Wildlife Inspector Office of Law Enforcement U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

2015-2016: Strengthening CITES Inspections
in Central America and the Dominican Republic



REGIONAL CONTEXT: In 2012, two delegations of agriculture and customs inspectors from Central America and Dominican Republic were invited by DOI-ITAP to the U.S. for two 1-week hands-on training tours on CITES and wildlife inspections. These tours were hosted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Office of Law Enforcement at the Port of Miami, Florida. It was the first time that the office received a group of peers from other countries. During this successful and interactive training, participants agreed to continue networking and exchanging information on trends and other important issues to strengthen implementation of CITES regulations and better combat wildlife trafficking.

DOI-ITAP ASSIGNMENT: With support from the U.S. Department of State and FWS, Wildlife Inspector Sarita Valentin worked with DOI-ITAP staff to develop and deliver a first-ever series of national level two-day CITES implementation and enforcement workshops provided to Central America and Dominican Republic inspection officials on issues such as CITES history, permits, and the movement and inspection of wildlife.

What was your role in this institutional strengthening process?

The CITES workshops were a result of the initial exchange in 2012, and it stems from the need to better communicate and exchange information among the agencies tasked with enforcing CITES. In addition to being an Inspector, I also issue CITES permits in the Port of Miami. So, with my knowledge and based on our experience with inspections, I developed and translated the training sessions, and I was a presenter for these 2-day workshops. The focus was providing a basic understanding of what is CITES, why is CITES here, and why it behooves everybody within the global wildlife trade; how do we develop and exchange inspection trends and intelligence information; how are we going to interdict something that we don't know about; and how can we all work together and strengthen these communication lines in order to perform our mission.

How was your experience during preparation for the assignments?

I had the greatest support from DOI-ITAP. From the beginning and throughout the process they took care of setting me up in the countries; so, that's something that I never had to worry about. The preparation for this workshop was as smooth as possible.

What do you consider were your main contributions to this process?

I think my biggest contribution was to bring the U.S. experience and put a face to the U.S. program so that our partners from Central America and Dominican Republic feel comfortable; that they feel they're not alone; and that we've had some learning experiences. I pull some from my personal real life experience as a Wildlife Inspector at the port; Miami being one of the biggest ports. I've seen every case and with my colleagues we also work very closely with criminal investigators at the port. But I think the biggest takeaway is that this process has opened these lines of communication between the U.S and the Central American and Dominican Republic authorities. People see what we do in the U.S. and I take back to my office what happens in these countries and the way the CITES programs are established.

What was the impact of this experience at your professional and personal level?

Professionally, I think it opens a network of people that truly believe in the program. Also, being able to know people and knowing how the programs work, we have updated information and that makes the hard work more doable. Now we (at the Port of Miami) are a focal point. Other ports in the nation will call Miami and say *"what's the latest in Honduras, in El Salvador, is this prohibited, who is my contact?"* I even provide this information to my Washington contacts. At the personal level, I had never been to the Central American region before and for me, THE plus that I'm taking and that nobody is going to take away from me is the people; the humbleness of the people receiving the information, opening their doors and saying *"let's talk about it."* And there is also the culture, the food. All that is priceless.

What would you tell someone considering participating in a DOI-ITAP assignment?

When you have these exchanges of information I cannot say that only our partners are going to take advantage of it. We are going to grow on our end, too. And I go back and I encourage our inspectors in Miami because I strongly believe this is real down-earth-grass root type of training and I encourage it. Because not only are we coming to teach or present, but [we are] also coming to learn and we have to be open to that. We are also open to roundtable discussions; how can we all be able to have takeaways and lessons learned from it. It's also important to have a positive attitude and knowing that we're all coming to learn.



Left: Wildlife inspector seizes coral shipment for violation of U.S. wildlife laws. Photo USFWS. Right: Ms. Valentin leading a CITES & Inspections workshop in San Salvador, El Salvador, August 2016. Through these national workshops, Ms. Valentin shared her experience as a Wildlife Inspector at the Port of Miami and learned how inspections and CITES programs work in each country. Photo: DOI-ITAP

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