

## The next decade of Sandwatch in the Dominican Republic: An Interview with Ms Maria Mercedes Brito Feliz, Secretary-General, UNESCO National Commission for UNESCO, 29<sup>th</sup> May 2014

The Dominican Republic participated in the launch of Sandwatch and the first training workshop in the Caribbean island of St. Lucia in 2001 and has been actively involved ever since. In this article, we explore with Ms. Maria Mercedes Brito Feliz some of the reasons for the success of Sandwatch in the Dominican Republic, and what the second decade looks like for Sandwatch in Dominican Republic.



***"Right from the beginning we understood the benefit and the contribution Sandwatch could bring to the whole world by co-existing in harmony with the ocean, and this is what inspired us" said Ms Brito Feliz.***

"We try to empower each community to live with their beach, to care for their beach and to take ownership of their beach. It is like an emotional relationship –you learn to fall in love with your beach – and we motivate the students from this viewpoint. At the beginning it was more a case of students going to the beach to have fun – this is what young people like to do at the beach. But gradually after working with Sandwatch they understand the need to care for the beach and to look after it" said Maria Brito Feliz.

She recalled how in 2008 Sandwatch students working on Montero beach on the south coast of the Dominican Republic noticed a significant increase in the turbidity (amount of sediment) of the seawater. They found this was due to the illegal construction of a jetty by a nearby hotel and reported the findings to the Department of Coastal and Marine Resources who then halted the construction and fined the hotel.

### Achievements over the last decade include:

**More than 1,000 High School students have been trained in Sandwatch:**

typically Sandwatch is started in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade of High School. When that group of students moves up to the next grade, they have the responsibility to help the newcomers entering 1<sup>st</sup> grade. This peer-to-peer exchange of knowledge and experience benefits each group of students.

**High School students apply Sandwatch to their community service requirements:**

in order to graduate from High School, students have to do 60 hours of community service. The fourth component of the Sandwatch M.A.S.T (Monitoring, Sharing, Analysis and Taking Action) approach is about "Taking action". More than half the students trained in Sandwatch in the Dominican Republic have used Sandwatch for their community service activities.

**Several institutions in the Dominican Republic are involved in Sandwatch:**

the project is housed in the UNESCO National Commission for the Dominican Republic and more specifically in the Associated Schools Project (ASP) programme. However, it is coordinated by a national committee, established in 2003, comprising representatives from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Natural Resources and the National Aquarium.

**The Next Decade of Sandwatch:**

One of the main goals for this second decade is to expand Sandwatch to cover the entire coast of the Country—this includes the Atlantic coast and given the distances involved this is a formidable challenge.

The Sandwatch programme has faced many challenges over the years including getting funding for equipment and transport to the beach for field practice. Like in other countries, the Sandwatch coordinators in the Dominican Republic need to continually look for innovative ways around such problems.

"Collaborating with other programmes and events, like Oceans Day, Beach Clean-up day and Water Day has also worked well in terms of maintaining visibility and ensuring that our Minister is aware of the Sandwatch activities" added Maria Brito Feliz.

One of the lasting testimonies of the sustainability of Sandwatch in the Dominican Republic is that the programme is now being coordinated at the UNESCO National Commission by a very motivated and hardworking young man, Franklin Jesús Tejeda, a former Sandwatch student who finished High School in 2010.



***Franklin Jesús Tejeda, Sandwatch Technical Coordinator, at a Training Workshop on the Sandwatch International Database, Boca Chica, 30 May 2014***