Academic Summit CELAC-EU Brussels, 8 - 9 June 2015

Thematic workshops (tentative)

Position "Oceans & Lakes" and research group APNA - DBIO

1- Education – academic training (connects to "Strenghtening the CELAC-EU bilateral university cooperation")

The VUB is the coordinator of the interuniversity MSc programme involving 3 universities (VUB, UGent, UAntwerpen) and more institutions: 'Marine and Lacustrine Science and Management', usually calle 'Oceans & Lakes'. See: www.oceansandlakes.be

This MSc programme has about 30 students in both years and delivers one diploma for the 3 universities, a unique offer from Flanders to foreign students.

Many of our students and many more graduates are from Latin America. They perform(ed) research for their graduation, very often on important issues in resp. home countries.

After graduation we keep close contact with many of them and we are actually working out a framework for alumni/graduate workshops to further strengthen networking.

This framework and network is directly available for fitting into CELAC-bilateral university collaboration.

2- Research – academic training (connects to "Universities societal responsibility")

The Department of Biology (DBIO) is involved in many research topics in developing countries (BRIC and also low income countries), often on issues related to either capacity building and/or environmental problems.

My research group APNA focuses particularly on mangrove ecosystems, which are occurring worldwide and in many coastal Latin American states, extensively. They offer many ecosystem services, up to the level of great dependency of local communities on their state of ecological health. The latter is threatened is most places, by development, outright overexploitation, by pollution (e.g. oil spills, land runoff because of inappropriate management of river catchment), sea level rise. They are considered amongst the most threatened life support systems worldwide. Their decline hits many of the poorest communities.

Apart from fundamental research as to mangroves' functioning and evolutionary adaptation, a major research effort is done by my group (in collaboration with the ULB) to study the 'poverty trap', the relation between diversity, ecosystem health and poverty. This applies also to Latin American nations.

Poverty alleviation is however not the only societal issue and responsibility of researchers. Mangroves support fisheries, also beyond artisanal fisheries, contribute considerably to coastal protection by diminishing coastal erosion, hence to land management, and have been reported to sequester more carbon an areal basis than e.g. tropical rain forests. This makes them also of great importance to society as a whole.

We are convinced the societal responsibility of the research community should translate into support for increasing human wellbeing.