

## U.S. Groups Petition to Protect Panama World Heritage Site

**PARIS, France**, April 24, 2007 (ENS) - The Arizona-based **Center for Biological Diversity** and more than 30 other organizations from the United States and Panama Monday petitioned the World Heritage Committee to list La Amistad International Park as a World Heritage site In Danger due to the planned construction of four hydroelectric dams.

The World Heritage Committee is part of UNESCO and is responsible for implementing a 1972 treaty to protect natural and cultural areas of outstanding universal value.

La Amistad, Spanish for the word friendship, is a World Heritage site designated in 1990 and shared by Panama and Costa Rica. It protects the largest and most diverse virgin rainforest remaining in Central America. It is one of the last refuges for such endangered species as the jaguar, ocelot, Central American tapir, resplendent quetzal and harpy eagle.

One of the world's largest power companies, the AES Corporation, based in Arlington, Virginia, is planning to construct a series of hydroelectric dams in the Changuinola River basin of Panama, putting the exceptional natural values of La Amistad at risk, according to the petitioners.

The Changuinola River flows from the heart of La Amistad and is one of the only free-flowing rivers remaining in Central America. The four dams would permanently alter more than 600 miles of stream and flood tribal lands.

"The dams, roads, bridges and power lines slated for construction would devastate unique native species, destroy a dynamic, free-flowing river, and open this remote jungle for development," **said Peter Galvin, conservation director with the Center for Biological Diversity.**

La Amistad supports more than 215 species of mammals, 600 species of birds, 115 species of fish, and 250 species of reptiles and amphibians. It also contains one of the highest levels of endemism in Central America, supporting several hundred plant species and 40 bird species that are found nowhere else in the world.

Additionally, the park supports several indigenous tribal communities that live along its border, including the Naso and Ngobe tribes in the Changuinola River basin.

"We must act now to protect La Amistad or else risk losing this international treasure," said Ezekiel Miranda, an environmental leader who lives near La Amistad.

The dams have been promoted as a way to offset greenhouse gas emissions and global warming, but a growing body of scientific evidence shows that dams and reservoirs, particularly those in the tropics, increase rather than decrease greenhouse gas emissions because they create a significant amount of methane, **says Galvin.**

Once La Amistad is listed as "In Danger," the World Heritage Committee and Panama must adopt a plan for corrective measures and take all efforts to restore its values. The World Heritage Committee can also allocate financial assistance from the World Heritage Fund.