

# Ecological Restoration Brief

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## Linking Texas and Cuba: Protecting Nature's Migrants

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In March, I boarded a plane with 19 university students on a 10 day educational study trip to Cuba. As we made the 45 minute flight between Miami and Havana, below us many non-human species were riding ocean and air currents northwards to arrive at their destination in the United States. For me and my traveling companions, getting on the plane with visa in hand was an easy crossing. For those traveling below us, this crossing is far more complicated.

As the largest island in the Caribbean, Cuba, located at the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico, is the breeding and stop-over grounds for many migratory species that end up in Texas and other parts of the United States. Its relative isolation over the past 50 years has enabled its coastal and terrestrial ecosystems to remain comparatively well preserved, allowing for the protection of endemic species as well as for those who spend time in both Cuba and the United States.

Large populations of migratory birds reside in both countries including: vireos, woodpeckers, warblers, herons and an assortment of raptors such as Sharp-shinned and Swainson's hawks. Additionally, Cuba's coastal underwater shelves, coral reefs, seagrass beds and mangroves provide habitat and breeding grounds for marine species such as the green and hawksbill sea turtles, sharks, manatees, and fish species including snapper, grouper and Atlantic bluefin tuna. The Cuban coastal waters are also the breeding grounds for microbes and tiny larvae, offspring of fish and lobster, which float on the currents and on which our Gulf Coast fisheries depend. Thus, we are inextricably linked to our neighbors across the Gulf by the many aquatic and avian species that ply the air and sea



**Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*)**  
Photo credit: Wikipedia

currents of the Gulf of Mexico between Cuba and the United States with no regard for international boundaries.

From the Gulf Coast fisheries and coastal tourism to pollinating plants, seed dispersal, consuming insects, and feeding our spirits, the quality of our lives, both here and in Cuba, depend on the health of these ecosystems, the species they support, and their ability to migrate between our two countries. Protecting and restoring their habitat is critical to the livelihood of these species. Many obstacles that threaten habitat and safe passage such as agricultural run-off, coastal and inland development, and oil drilling, to name a few, abound within both countries. The ability to effectively communicate and collaborate with our counterparts across the Gulf to ensure adequate monitoring and regulation of potential and real threats to these migratory species is paramount.

With the thaw in US-Cuban relations, we, as American scientists, environmentalists, and citizens, particularly those of us with a stake in the Gulf Coast region, must find ways to develop linkages with our counterparts in Cuba to protect the future of the systems on which we depend. We need new, collaborative ways to study, assess, and monitor changes in habitats. We need to support our Cuban counterparts in accessing up to date information and resources and in developing a voice where their concerns can be heard nationally and internationally. Some of this has started, despite being hampered by long-standing embargo and political differences. It would, however, behoove those of us with direct access to the Gulf of Mexico to reach out and to start developing mechanisms for greater international cooperation to ensure that all these species can safely cross international boundaries. Their lives depend on it, as do ours.



**Green Sea Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*). Photo credit: Andy Bruckner, NOAA**

**The Society for Ecological Restoration, Texas Chapter promotes ecological restoration as a means of sustaining the diversity of life on Earth and re-establishing an ecologically healthy relationship between nature and culture.**

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