

SPOTLIGHT ON PEOPLE

Mercedes Denis is a scientist at heart for SI's Tropical Research Institute

BY MARA JONAS
OPA Staff Writer

Researchers are the superstars of science. When a scientific breakthrough is announced, quotes by the lead scientist appear in news articles and the head of the research center is commended. Generally, there is no mention of all-important behind-the-scenes players like Mercedes Arosemena de Denis.

As scientific coordinator for the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute's Naos Island Laboratories, Denis is responsible for day-to-day operation of the 40,000-square-foot facility.

Naos is the largest of STRI's marine laboratories, and is located next to Panama City, near the Pacific entrance of the Panama Canal. Here the Isthmus of Panama narrows to little more than 65 kilometers wide, providing an excellent opportunity for comparative studies between the tropical Atlantic (Caribbean) and eastern Pacific oceans. STRI's Naos facility contains an extensive seawater system for research on marine organisms, a well-equipped molecular biological research facility and laboratories for both marine and archaeological research. There also is a fully equipped dive locker and a fleet of several small boats.

Between running the laboratory's expansive facilities, purchasing and coordinating the use of sensitive scientific equipment and providing support to the 130 staff, researchers, fellows, interns and visitors on site on any given day, Denis' work can be quite demanding.

Her job became even more complex when Naos Island was designated as a "Tourism Area" in 2000. "The development of Naos Island for



Mercedes Denis handles everything from administration to operations to negotiations for STRI's Naos Island lab.

tourism—if not well-coordinated—could bring serious problems for us," Denis says.

Current development projects include the construction of apartments and a hotel near the laboratory. "Thanks to close communication with the developers, I have been able to coordinate the detonation work required for construction so that our staff, equipment and research are not affected," Denis explains.

She also was able to obtain from the developers the use of a piece of land that can be converted into parking for the Nature Center at Punta

Culebra when the developers complete their project.

Denis, a Panama City native, first joined STRI in 1988 as administrative technician at Naos. After serving as management services assistant and Marine Program support services manager, Denis was promoted to her current position in 2004.

Denis lives in Marbella, in the Bella Vista district of Panama with her husband, Jose Antonio. Their son, Gabriel Alfonso, is currently completing a surgical residency at Lankester Hospital in the suburbs of Philadelphia.

opening at STRI "I started investigating the Smithsonian and I felt an immediate connection with the Institution's work with living organisms and ecosystems and its commitment to the conservation of the tropical environment," she explains.

Denis often serves as host to important visitors to the marine facilities at Naos and the Nature Center at Punta Culebra. "It's kind of funny—when I am showing visitors around Naos, talking about the work that is being done here, most of the time they think my own background is in science," Denis says. "I tell them I have science in my heart, but my background is business."

Denis' love of science and loyalty to the researchers she serves at STRI have helped her bridge the gap between the scientific and management staff, a feat not easily accomplished, according to Harilaos Lessios, acting deputy director of STRI and head scientist at Naos.

"She is unanimously acknowledged by the scientists as a person they both like personally and appreciate for the support she provides to our research," Lessios says. "Many of us in the marine lab are curmudgeons who are difficult to please," he continues, "yet we all agree that without Mercedes, the lab would fall apart."

The value of Denis' work perhaps is best summed up by a statement made by STRI's Acting Director Eldredge Bermingham: "Mercedes and I have worked together for many years...She is an incredible resource who combines intelligence, diplomacy and dedication to maximize the productivity of STRI's marine research program. She also represents STRI with extraordinary grace and success." ■

Denis received a bachelor's degree in business administration from the College of Boca Raton in Florida in 1978. She began her professional career as an administrative assistant for various companies in Florida before accepting a position as public relations and sales manager at a hotel in Cali, Colombia.

In 1983, Denis returned to Panama and took a job as special events director for the National Investment Bureau of the Republic of Panama.

She says that her interest in science was piqued when she saw an advertisement in the local papers for a job

PEOPLE IN THE NEWS

General Counsel **John Huerta** gave the keynote address at the Hispanic Bar Association of the District of Columbia's annual Equal Justice ceremony in Washington, D.C. Huerta spoke of his community involvement as a student at the University of California at Berkeley and as a Department of Justice employee.

SI Libraries

Martin Kalfatovic, head of the New Media Office, presented a plenary talk at the 2008 National Federation of Abstracting and Information Services Annual Conference in Philadelphia. The talk covered the Biodiversity Heritage Library project, a collaborative effort between 10 natural history museum, research institution and botanical libraries to develop a plan for digitizing the published literature on biodiversity held in their respective collections.

Postal Museum

Cheryl Ganz, chief curator of philately, was awarded the 2008 Elizabeth C. Pope Medal for a Lifetime of Contribution to Philately for her dedication to sharing knowledge of philately and postal history.

Tropical Research Institute

Stanley Heckedon-Moreno, director

of communications and public programs and Galeta Point Marine Laboratory coordinator, appeared on a segment of "Morning Edition's Climate Connection" series on National Public Radio. Heckedon-Moreno discussed the potential consequences for the Panama Canal of drier than normal weather caused by climate change, deforestation or El Niño. According to Heckedon-Moreno, the canal depends on rain rather than seawater to maintain water levels, and changes in rainfall might mean the canal could lack sufficient water for its locks to operate.

Early Enrichment Center

The Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center held its annual staff appreciation dinner in February. **Melissa Covington**, lead teacher for the Cinnamon Bears, was honored with the 2008 Diane Homiak Memorial Award. **Anna Forgeron**, a member of the administrative team and the museum educator for the SEEC kindergarten class, was presented with the Distinguished Staff Award. Both awards honor exceptional staff members who bring dedication, commitment, creativity and professionalism to the program.

Alli Feigen, first-year lead teacher for the Toucan class, received special

recognition as the SEEC "rookie of the year."

Natural History

The forensic research of **Doug Owsley**, curator in the Department of Anthropology, was featured in the

television program, "Written in Bone," which premiered on the History Channel as part of the "Save Our History" series.

Doug Ubelaker, curator of physical anthropology, completed his term as vice president in charge of mem-

bership and was elected treasurer of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences at its annual meeting in Washington, D.C. He also has been appointed book review editor for the *Journal of Forensic Sciences*. ■

—Mara Jonas

POINT OF VIEW SI relies on our volunteers



Demetrius Denson
Maintenance Worker
Facilities Engineering, Operations

I volunteer for Natural History's Exhibits Department. Visitors are always so amazed with the exhibits—I wanted to play a part in that.



Grace Jaeger
Program Officer
Office of the Regents

I am a volunteer event monitor for The Smithsonian Associates and a volunteer usher at Arena Stage—I get to see the shows for free!



Sukhi Sodhi
Branch Chief
Facilities Engineering, Operations

Once I retire, I might volunteer for one of the Smithsonian's museums or help elderly people in a hospital or nursing home.