

Big challenges of inter-American seas region meet big idea at Florida State

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Inter-American Seas Research Consortium logo. Credit: Inter-American Seas Research Consortium

Powered by interdisciplinary muscle and global vision, Florida State University is launching an ambitious research initiative focused on the rising tide of ecological, economic and cultural problems facing the Inter-American Seas and the severe deficit of research aimed at solving them.

Reducing that deficit of relevant, strategic research is the mission of Florida State's new Inter-American Seas Research Consortium (ISRC). The mission is critical because intensifying usage of the waters in the economically and geopolitically vital region — formed by the Gulf of Mexico, Caribbean Sea and southeast U.S. Continental Shelf — is both enabling and threatening coastal development, fisheries, hydrocarbon extraction, transportation opportunities and tourism.

Florida's fortunes are inextricably bound to those of the Inter-American Seas, according to FSU geography Professor Phil Steinberg, who is helping to organize the consortium's kickoff symposium on Dec. 8.

"When Cuba proposes offshore oil drilling, when Central American countries license Asian trawlers to operate off their Caribbean waters, when oil from the Deepwater Horizon incident spreads to Florida's shores, and when tourism promoters in Key West publicize the history of its original settlers who, over the course of 50 years, migrated from the Carolinas to the Bahamas to the Florida Keys, we are reminded," said Steinberg, "that Florida's coastal frontier is not a space that divides.

"Rather, it is a space that connects — geophysically, culturally, economically and politically," he said. "And at Florida State University, that space also connects academic disciplines."

To the complex, interrelated issues of the Inter-American Seas, the ISRC will bring a multi-disciplinary team of experts in the biological, physical and social sciences, geography, history, law and business.

The idea is "problem-solving research" — to be generated by complementary collaborations not only within Florida State itself but also with scholars and institutions around the state, region and world.

"It is a truly big idea," said FSU College of Arts and Sciences Interim Dean Sam Huckaba, a mathematics professor. "By bringing cultural, economic, legal, political and social issues to the same table with core scientific study of the climate, environment and ocean, the ISRC is reaching for a unique and ultimately global presence."

At the consortium's interdisciplinary helm are the Florida State colleges of Arts and Sciences; Law; Business; and Social Sciences and Public Policy. Also on board are FSU's Coastal and Marine Laboratory; Center

for Ocean-Atmosphere Prediction Studies; and Center for Global Engagement.

And from those ISRC partners will come marine biologists, geologists, meteorologists, geographers, cultural historians, economists, urban and regional planners, and legal experts on ocean and coastal management, among others. Also participating will be emerging scholars from Florida State's graduate and undergraduate student bodies.

The goals: promote regional sustainable use, conservation-oriented public policy and risk-averse management.

To accomplish them, the ISRC partners will lead interdisciplinary workshops with Florida State, national and international scholars and train emerging scholars as the next generation's academic and professional leaders. They also will combine the FSU faculty's capabilities and expertise with those of governmental, industry and other higher-education partners to address major social and ecological challenges.

It is important to remember that success in the Inter-American Seas will require a keen understanding of the culture for which solutions are crafted, according to FSU Coastal and Marine Laboratory Director Felicia Coleman, a marine ecologist.

"While we as a state and nation embrace global economies and look to global conservation measures to ensure sustained, resilient and healthy environments, doing so requires that we understand the cultural context in which all decisions are made by individuals and in turn by their governments," Coleman said.

Kickoff Symposium

The problem-solving research officially begins on Thursday, Dec. 8, with the ISRC kickoff symposium that will formally introduce the consortium's multidisciplinary mission.

Featuring eminent speakers, roundtable discussions, and posters that will be introduced in a series of brief presentations by faculty and students, the event will showcase the three interrelated areas on which ISRC research will focus:

- coastal and marine science;
- societies, cultures and connections; and
- law, risk and governance.

The Dec. 8 symposium will be held from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. at the Florida State University Alumni Center, located at 1030 W. Tennessee St. in Tallahassee (access driving directions here and a campus map here). While participants should register in advance, the \$20 registration fee, which includes a continental breakfast, lunch and afternoon hors d'oeuvres, can be paid on the day of the event. Visit the ISRC website here to access complete symposium details and a registration form.

"The ISRC is a unique effort that leverages our broad spectrum of strengths at Florida State," said FSU Associate Vice President for Research Ross Ellington, a biologist. "Complex problems can only be studied by convening interdisciplinary groups of scholars and their students. The ISRC is such a vehicle, which our kickoff symposium will highlight."

Provided by Florida State University

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