

MPA NEWS



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In Colombian MPA, Management Files Suit to Stop Oil Exploration Inside Boundary

A Colombian MPA has taken legal action against the country's National Agency of Hydrocarbons (ANH) to stop undersea exploration for petroleum within the site's boundaries. Management of the Seaflower Biosphere Reserve and Marine Protected Area learned from the national news media in December that two areas of the MPA were auctioned by ANH in mid-2010 for exploration. The MPA is located in the San Andres Archipelago of the southwestern Caribbean.

In response to the lawsuit by Seaflower management, ANH has temporarily suspended exploration activity at the Seaflower lease sites. ANH will meet with representatives of the island community to communicate how the exploration will be done and the environmental safeguards in place. But the agency has indicated no intent to revoke the licenses, which were awarded to Ecopetrol (of Colombia) and Repsol-YPF (of Spain and Argentina). As a result, the MPA management has not withdrawn its lawsuit.

Colombian Presidents Alvaro Uribe (in office from 2002-2010) and Juan Manuel Santos (who took office in August 2010) have each emphasized new offshore exploration to offset declining oil production. The two sites within Seaflower were among 78 blocks that the government auctioned throughout Colombian waters.

The lease areas and lawsuit

The total area of the Seaflower MPA is 65,000 km². Of that, more than 20,000 km² are included in the two leased blocks, known as Cayos 1 and Cayos 5:

- Cayos 1 covers 9,440 km² and includes Quitasueño Bank, the largest coral structure in the San Andres Archipelago at 60 km long and 10-20 km wide. The block also includes open-ocean area that has never been studied. The lease grants exploration rights.
- Cayos 5 covers 10,773 km² and includes the entire 32-km long Old Providence barrier reef. The block also includes coastal waters of Old Providence and Santa Catalina islands, with an insular shelf of 298 km², and open ocean that contains grouper spawning aggregation sites and seamounts. The lease for this block allows exploration followed by hydrocarbon development or production.

The Seaflower MPA is managed by CORALINA, the Colombian government environmental authority for the San Andres Archipelago. Seaflower has been a member of the UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves since 2000 and is on the tentative list of proposed World Heritage sites. The goal of the MPA is to conserve marine ecosystems and biodiversity while protecting the livelihoods and tenure of the archipelago's indigenous people - integrating conservation with sustainable fishing, harvesting, and locally run tourism. In October 2010, Seaflower MPA was honored as the initiative that best realized the goals of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, outcompeting more than 1100 other organizations from around the world (<http://bit.ly/Coralina>).

To halt oil exploration in Seaflower, CORALINA filed an Acción Popular ("Popular Action"), a legal instrument granted to Colombians that allows them to seek protection of collective rights and interests related to their homelands, environment, and other interests. The Seaflower Acción Popular claims that the oil leases violate several agreements ratified by the Colombian government, including the Convention on Biological Diversity; International Labour Organization Convention 169 (which protects tribal and indigenous people); and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The lawsuit asks that the government avoid developing petroleum projects within or close to Seaflower.

The normal exploration method for offshore petroleum involves seismic surveys. These surveys explore the geologic substructure of the seafloor by sending low-frequency sound energy into the ground and analyzing the returned energy. The sound waves can impact marine life, depending on the sensitivity of species and their distance from the sound source. MPA News examined seismic surveys in our [November-December 2009](#) and [January-February 2010](#) issues.

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