

# MPA NEWS



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## Perspective: Mexico designates three large multiple-use MPAs to protect marine life and fishing communities

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On 7 December 2016, during the 13<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP13) held in Cancún, the Mexican Government designated three new MPAs totaling 647,015 km<sup>2</sup>. All three sites are multiple-use biosphere reserves, with some zones that are strictly protected (no-take) and others that are sustainably managed.

### The three MPAs

The **Baja California Pacific Islands Biosphere Reserve**, covering 11,612 km<sup>2</sup>, was designated off the west coast of the Baja California Peninsula. After an 11-year multi-stakeholder consultation and negotiation process, this new biosphere reserve represents a substantial effort to protect Mexico's largest gap in island conservation through multiple-use zoning. The zoning covers not only islands (701 km<sup>2</sup>) but also a large portion of their surrounding waters (10,911 km<sup>2</sup>). These waters are critical both to an array of sea life (fish, marine mammals, seabirds) and to fishing cooperatives who depend on local fishing grounds for their livelihoods.

Zoning includes 17 strictly protected core zones: 16 of them are terrestrial while the one marine core zone covers 0.8 km<sup>2</sup>. Multiple-use buffer zones cover nearly all the rest of the MPA. In these buffer zones, important commercial fisheries will be allowed to continue for lobster (*Panulirus spp.*), abalone (*Haliotis spp.*) and sea urchin (*Strongylocentrotus spp.*).

The new biosphere reserve includes six archipelagos: Coronado, Todos Santos, San Jerónimo, San Benito, Cedros and Bahía Magdalena, comprising a total of 21 islands and 97 islets. While all of the islands host important bird colonies, the San Benito Islands have the greatest abundance of seabirds in the entire Eastern Pacific Ocean: more than 2 million birds of 13 different species congregate annually to breed there. Northern elephant seals (*Mirounga angustirostris*) and Guadalupe fur seals (*Arctocephalus townsendi*) have also naturally recolonized San Benito East Island.

The **Mexican Caribbean Biosphere Reserve**, a 57,541-km<sup>2</sup> MPA of which nearly all is marine (57,255 km<sup>2</sup>), was designated off the eastern coast of the Yucatan Peninsula in the Caribbean Sea. Designation followed an intensive seven-month public consultation process, mainly involving stakeholders from the fisheries and tourism sectors. This biosphere reserve, together with the marine portions of 12 other preexisting federal MPAs, integrates a 63,825-km<sup>2</sup> marine protection and sustainable use complex, including nearly half the length of the 1000-km Mesoamerican Reef, the largest reef system in the Western Hemisphere. Coral reefs, coastal wetlands, and deep-sea habitats will be permanently conserved and sustainably managed within this multi-use MPA.

Zoning includes three strictly protected core zones covering 19,326 km<sup>2</sup>, of which 100 km<sup>2</sup> corresponds to coastal habitats and 19,226 km<sup>2</sup> to the deep-sea marine area. The deep-sea zoning starts 100 meters below sea level and extends to the sea floor; fishing and mining activities are not permitted in this zone. A 38,214-km<sup>2</sup> multiple-use buffer zone will allow important commercial fisheries for spiny lobster (*Panulirus argus*), queen conch (*Strombus gigas*), shrimp (*Sicyonia brevirostris*, *Farfantepenaeus spp.*) and finfish species. Regionally important tourism activities — including snorkeling and diving on coral reefs, sport fishing, and viewing of aggregations of whale sharks (*Rhincodon typus*), bull sharks (*Carcharhinus leucas*) and cownose rays (*Rhinoptera bonasus*) — will also be allowed. Bottom trawling for shrimp will be authorized in a limited area in the northeastern portion of the continental shelf. Mining of minerals is prohibited throughout the MPA. (As a result of Mexico's 2014 Energy Reform, exploration and extraction of oil is not permitted in any Mexican protected area.)

The **Deep Mexican Pacific Biosphere Reserve** is a 577,862-km<sup>2</sup> deep-sea multi-use MPA, designated from 800 meters below the sea surface to the sea floor in Mexico's Pacific waters. Designed to protect fragile seabed ecosystems, this biosphere reserve is currently Mexico's largest protected area and the 12<sup>th</sup>-largest MPA worldwide. Mining and fishing will not be allowed in the MPA's 15 strictly protected core zones that cover 187,771 km<sup>2</sup>. In the MPA's 390,091 km<sup>2</sup> of buffer zones, no mining and only fishing activities that do not use bottom-trawling gear will be permitted. (In the waters above this MPA, a *Mysticeti* and *Odontoceti* Refuge Area, designated in 2002, protects all large whales in Mexico's EEZ, while the economically important tuna fishery is managed by the National Fisheries Commission [CONAPESCA] within the framework of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission [IATTC].)

This MPA protects the Tehuantepec Trench (Mexico's deepest point at 6721 meters below sea level); Mexico's highest concentration of seamounts, including the *Mathematicians Seamounts*; the lower reaches of the Banderas, Petacalco-Lázaro Cárdenas, and Ometepe grand marine canyons; the geologically active East Pacific Rise, where new marine floor is constantly created by the presence of hydrothermal vents; and *deep sea habitats surrounding the core and buffer areas of the Revillagigedo Archipelago*, already included on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

### New MPAs in a time of budgetary constraints

Concerns have been voiced that more than tripling Mexico's protected area coverage at a time of serious budgetary constraints for management will drain resources for existing protected areas. Some have suggested this indicates these MPAs were created only in order for Mexico to meet Aichi Target 11.

However, while the national budgetary crisis is certainly real and worrisome, it should be noted that only the Baja California Pacific Islands and the coastal portion of the Mexican Caribbean biosphere reserves will require immediate on-the-water management efforts. Currently protecting the deep-sea portions of them will only require focusing existing surveillance activities of the EEZ by the Mexican Navy and a relatively small increase in administrative tasks — since no public or private stakeholders currently use resources from these deep zones. Precisely this situation is what makes their establishment more than timely. Why wait for conflicts to emerge in order to create MPAs?

It is encouraging to see Mexico adopt measures that will protect the deep ocean. These measures are implementing United Nations General Assembly resolutions on deep-sea protection, such as Resolution 61/105, and support similar measures taken by the European Union, individual countries, and regional fisheries management organizations around the world.

#### For more information:

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