

# MPA NEWS



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## Perspective | The MPAs of Central America (last of three articles): Lessons learned from the past 20 years

**Editor's note:** The countries of Central America possess several decades of experience with coastal and marine protected areas. MPA News invited Carlos Espinosa, founder and director of [Dos Mares](#), to contribute insights on the past, present, and future of MPAs in Central America. Dos Mares promotes MPA sustainability in the region by disseminating marine science knowledge and conservation tools, and by fostering green business opportunities. Carlos is originally from Nicaragua, and worked for several international agencies in Central America, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the United States before founding Dos Mares. The following is the third of three articles he has contributed. His first was in [our May 2018 issue](#). His second, with Néstor J. Windevoxhel as co-author, [was in June](#).

His co-authors on this third article – Néstor Windevoxhel again and Juan C. Villagran – both have extensive work experience with Central American protected areas and deep knowledge of the history, successes, challenges, and opportunities for biodiversity conservation in the region.

**By Carlos A. Espinosa, Néstor J. Windevoxhel, and Juan C. Villagran**

Protected areas in Central America showcase the region's magnificent landscape and tropical biodiversity – terrestrial and marine. They help maintain a sustainable supply of water, food, and other natural resources essential for all life in the region. And they provide Central America's inhabitants a way to protect their own economy, welfare, and future.

Sixty years have passed since the region's first coastal protected area, the Volcan Cosiguina National Park, was designated on the Gulf of Fonseca in Nicaragua. Over the past 20 years in particular, Central American governments and international supporters have designated many coastal and marine protected areas. Social awareness of the importance of these protected areas is growing, and the number of people prepared professionally to work for the conservation of these areas increases each year in the region.

However, despite these advances and [some examples of successful MPAs](#) in Central America, the efforts have not been enough to develop the management of many other areas nor maintain their conservation. [There remain many challenges](#), including even the spread of organized crime. So what are the lessons learned after years of effort, and how will these experiences help us focus better on meeting the challenges?

### Lessons learned in financing and sustainability

Although progress has been made in all Central American countries to designate networks of marine protected areas, the MPAs usually do not have the necessary human and financial resources to be managed effectively. The national budgets for conserving these areas are much lower than those for terrestrial areas, which are often longer established and of greater public recognition. As a result, for the MPAs of Central America, there is substantial dependence on resources from external cooperation and international private donors related to marine conservation. At the same time, the FAO estimates that international cooperation for protected areas in Latin America [has decreased by about 50% in recent years](#).

Although new tools for financial sustainability have emerged in recent decades – payments for environmental services, trusts, compensation by the private sector – these mechanisms by themselves have not achieved full financing of protected areas. In fact these novel financial mechanisms have often led to further decreases in government investment, achieving an unintended negative effect.

To improve the financing of protected areas, a greater investment by the State to fulfill its social responsibilities will be necessary. This should include the involvement of diverse government sectors – military, agriculture/livestock, fisheries, urban development – in supporting protected areas and being mindful of their impact on the same. There will also need to be the active participation of civil society and the private sector through an inclusive governance system. With a few exceptions, initiatives to generate alternative livelihoods for communities with regard to protected areas have not achieved the results expected, due to factors like poor follow-up and weak markets for new products.

### Lessons learned in governance and management

MPA governance in the region should involve greater participation of interest groups in management. Most protected areas in Central America encounter threats that originate outside them. Therefore it is impossible to achieve their conservation only with efforts made within their limits. It requires the engagement of MPA personnel in the surrounding communities.

In most Central American countries, the park directors and park guards have limited capacity to address environmental crimes or enforce the law with authority. The combination of a poor budget, limited interaction of park guards with users outside the protected area, and limited police backup results in inadequate enforcement capability. An important exception is Belize where the park rangers have police authority, are armed, are trained in legal matters, have the capacity to lead a police process, and can arrest offenders. The respect of Belizean citizens, and their resulting compliance with MPA regulations, is evident.

Although there are cases where progress has been made in the governance and management of these areas (like Belize, or Costa Rica), most areas in Central America do not have effective management. In addition, it has been difficult to find resources to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of enforcement and surveillance programs at sea.

### Practices that are no longer recommended in the region

Relying principally on international financing for the management of MPAs is a practice that should not continue. Each project, initiative, or donation should seek that the national government contributes equal resources. If this does not happen, most of the activities promoted will not be sustainable, and management of the areas will not improve in the long term.

The approach in which an MPA administrator defends the resources of the protected area against the rest of society is a strategy that has not allowed effective management of protected areas. Conservation efforts must be made not only within their limits but in their area of influence. This requires the involvement of protected area personnel in their surrounding communities.

Last, it is not advisable to continue to hire park guards without subjecting them to rigorous training. They must be able to enforce the law, represent themselves as a true authority, and increase their capacity for leadership, community development, and conflict resolution. They should also have a better salary according to their abilities.

#### For more information:

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