

MPA NEWS



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Perspective | The MPAs of Central America (second of three articles): Challenges faced, including the emergence of well-financed criminal groups

By Carlos A. Espinosa and Néstor J. Windevoxhel

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 United States before founding *Dos Mares*. The following is the second of three articles by him; his first was in [our May 2018 issue](#).

His co-author on this article, Néstor J. Windevoxhel, has worked for several large and multinational protected area conservation and financial programs. He is currently developing funding frameworks for national parks in Panama.

The challenges facing coastal and marine protected areas in Central America remain as serious as ever. And in some ways they are getting worse.

Some of these challenges are fairly common for MPAs worldwide: inadequate training and compensation for staff; lack of clarity in legal status and related laws; and lack of financial sustainability. (We recommend reading [Challenges for the Integral Management of Central America MPAs](#) for details on these.) The response to these challenges often varies according to the priorities of each country's government, the state of national economies, and other factors.

There are relatively unique challenges to this region as well. In the last 15 years, many protected areas have been affected by the emergence of well-financed criminal groups that are trafficking people and drugs through the region. Protected areas can be fertile areas for these practices. Where there are limited investments made by governments, protected areas have low supervision. They are also often isolated. This makes them preferred areas for illicit activities. Obviously, the presence of such activities puts protected area staff and associated people and organizations at risk. (One example: the 2013 murder of environmentalist [Jairo Mora Sandoval](#), who was killed by smugglers as he tried to protect leatherback turtle nests in Costa Rica.)

The criminal groups' presence has exacerbated an array of environmental impacts – including illegal occupations of land, deforestation, poaching, and pollution. One dramatic example is in Punta de Manabique in Guatemala, a coastal protected area in which so-called 'narco-ranchers' have deforested the reserve to raise cattle and palm trees as additional revenue sources. See: [Towards the Future that is Wanted or the Paradise that is Lost? A Vision to Share: Punta de Manabique, Guatemala](#).

The presence of criminal groups in a country's protected areas can form a vicious circle. We have observed that governments may be even less inclined to increase support for protected areas if they know the areas are already occupied by crime groups.

Progress being made

There is good news, though. There were some significant strides made in the 1980s and 1990s in the protected area systems of Central America. Costa Rica, Panama, and Guatemala are examples: all three sought the expansion and improved representativeness of their protected area systems. In these countries, more recent development of mechanisms such as private sector participation, co-management with communities, conservation funds, debt swaps, and payments for ecosystem services have been examples of progress.

There are local-level examples of good governance and participation mechanisms as seen with sustainable fishery management systems in the coastal lagoons of the Moskitia region of Nicaragua and Honduras. There are also tourism caps in some areas of Costa Rica and Panama, sustainable exploitation of mollusks in Nicaraguan parks, and fishing quotas in protected areas in Belize, which have all demonstrated their feasibility and respective benefits.

Local financial mechanisms such as the [Chagres](#) and [Darién Funds](#) – established in Panama in 2017 to help fund management of two national parks, and [financed through debt swaps](#) – are off to a good start. National nature-funding mechanisms such as [FIDECO](#) in Panama or [FIAES Fund](#) in El Salvador have also shown some success in terms of the volume of financial resources applied and the number of projects implemented as a result. Payments for ecosystem services in Guatemala, both in Sierra de las Minas and Cerro San Gil, as well as regional financial mechanisms such as the [Mesoamerican Reef Fund](#) (MAR Fund) – shared by Mexico, Belize, Guatemala and Honduras – and the wide application of varied forms of public participation in management have shown significant successes.

However, these recent financing mechanisms and opportunities are not sufficient by themselves to support the management of protected areas. And despite these positive examples, we have observed government budgets for protected areas in the region stop growing or even decline in recent years. Although the protected areas of Central America represent national and local goods and services – for the provision of water, fishing, tourism, and many other key services such as the operation of the Panama Canal – the investment required for effective management continues to be insufficient. We must do better.

Next article in this series: Lessons learned from Central American MPAs

For more information:

Carlos Espinosa, *Dos Mares*. Email: cespinosa@dosmares.org

Néstor J. Windevoxhel, Asesores Ambientales de Centroamérica S.A. (AACASA). Email: nwindevoxhel@gmail.com

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