

Eco 3: Américas

A monthly report
on development and
the environment in
Latin America



September 2019

Vol. 21 - No. 11

Inside

Around the region 2

Panama puts 1-year
hold on issuance of
new logging permits 3

Forest loss spooking
firms that buy inputs
from Brazil's Amazon 4

Uruguay tests system
to track agrochemical
spraying in real time 5

CENTERPIECE:

Planned development
on Baja coast is seen
as threat to health of
prized marine reserve 6

Q&A:

Indigenous leader in
Brazil sees pressure
mounting on Amazon
under Jair Bolsonaro 12

◀ photo by Carlos Aguilera

Centerpiece

Unchecked growth seen as risk to reserve

Mexico City, Mexico

Almost 25 years ago, the fishermen of Cabo Pulmo, a small village on the Gulf of California, packed up their nets and asked the Mexican government to declare the coral reef off their coast a protected area. The move proved successful beyond anyone's expectations. Within a decade, the abundance and diversity of fish in the reserve recovered more quickly than anywhere in the world, scientists say.

The fishing ban worked to the benefit of the fishermen too. Remaking themselves as guides, they found that there was more money in showing off the reef's swirling schools of groupers, snappers and jacks than in catching them. But the protection granted to the sea was never matched by a defense of the land. The stark desert landscape, looking out over empty beaches and a limpid sea, offers a tantalizing prospect to developers.

When the transition to a new presidential administration last year gave them an opening to pitch their plans, they seized the opportunity. Taking advantage of a lull in federal scrutiny, developers submitted environmental impact studies for five coastal projects north of the 70-square-kilometer (27-square-mile) marine

reserve, which is a national park. Within months, Mexico's Environment and Natural Resources Secretariat (Semarnat), the country's lead environmental agency, granted conditional approval to all five. Although the approvals mostly asked for additional studies before construction could begin, they marked a critical step forward for the projects.

But the speed of the approvals, and the government's refusal to heed calls for public discussion, rang alarm bells for environmental groups and local residents. They argue that development in the region, known as the East Cape, must be carefully managed to protect both the marine reserve, called Cabo Pulmo National Park, and the vulnerable coastal environment. "Cabo Pulmo isn't against development," says Ricardo Castro, a local community leader and a member of the park's advisory council. "We just have to see what kind of development. It has to be in line with the conditions of the area—and they don't support something massive."

The approvals added to doubts among environmental advocates about President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's commitment to conservation. It didn't help that his first appointee to lead Semarnat—Josefa González Blanco, who presided over most of the approvals—had negligible environmental experience. González Blanco stepped down in May of this year after admitting she had invoked her authority to force a commercial air flight to wait for her. She was replaced by Víctor Manuel Toledo, an academic with a deep background in ecology and biodiversity. Testifying before Congress on Sept. 4, Toledo acknowledged the secretariat's budget had been slashed by over 25% in the past year, to about US\$1.43 billion, but he promised the agency would put citizens at the center of its policies. "That means we are directly attending to the problems that arise throughout the country," he said.

Toledo's appointment gives hope to some advocates for protection of Cabo Pulmo that Semarnat might take their concerns to heart. "The last secretary allowed a lot of things to pass," says Octavio Aburto-Oropeza, a marine biologist at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California San Diego who has studied the Cabo Pulmo reserve closely. "I feel that the new secretary is quite radical in terms of his defense of the environment. I think that communities will be favored."

While environmental groups may be willing to give Toledo the benefit of the doubt for now, they are anxious to see whether he will support their call for a new land-use plan that would control the tourist development encroaching on the East Cape.

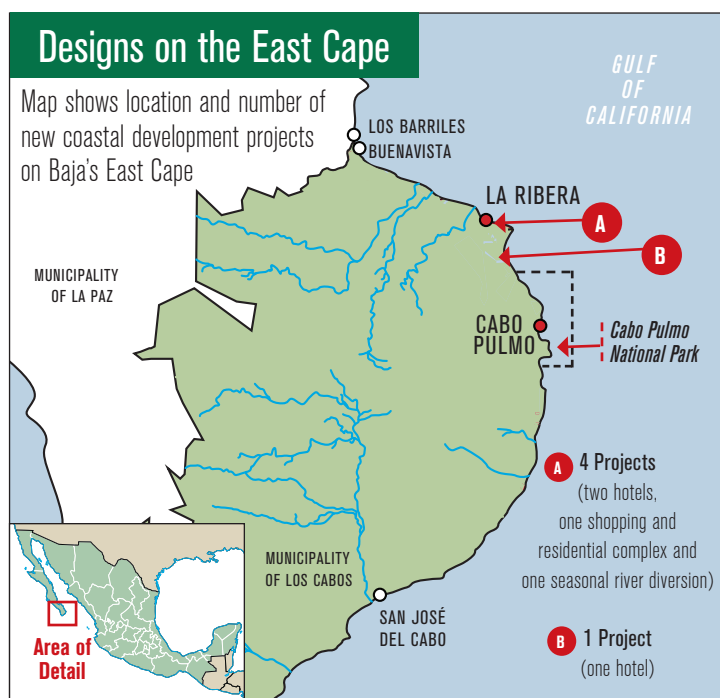
Although developers often sell their projects as a way to create jobs, the East Cape is lightly populated and most people there are employed. Instead, skeptics of development projects point out, new hotels and rental properties will attract migration, swelling the population and in the process posing a variety of environmental threats. To begin with, the demand for water would overtax the region's dwindling Santiago aquifer, and proposed desalinization plants could upset the marine ecosystem that nurtures the Gulf's rich wildlife. In addition, the local government is already hard-pressed to treat wastewater and manage trash collection.

"We have realized the risks have increased," says Sarahí Gómez, research coordinator at the northwestern office of the Mexican Center for Environmental Law (Cemda), one of a dozen groups in a conservation coalition called Cabo Pulmo Vivo. "The threat is to the whole region. We can't fight project by project."

Instead, Gómez says, the region needs an updated land-use plan for the East Cape to guide orderly growth.



The Costa Palmas resort in La Ribera seeks to divert a river. (Photo by Leonardo González)





The latest projects add to other developments that have begun to speckle the East Cape coast, all in differing stages of development. “There are developments creeping up from the south and down from the north,” says Martin Goebel, Mexico program director for LegacyWorks Group, one of the organizations in Cabo Pulmo Vivo. “At some point there will be a choke point—the park will become an iso-

lated island in a sea of development. Can it survive and thrive that way? The answer is probably no.”

One of the new projects is causing special concern. Hotel Bahía El Rincón is proposed for a site just over three kilometers (about two miles) north of the boundary marking the national park. The project marks the latest attempt to build in a place where developers have been trying to cre-

Underlying the East Cape development debate are questions about how such projects will affect the region’s coast (above) and Cabo Pulmo National Park (left), a prized marine reserve. (Photo by Leonardo González)

ate a resort for more than a decade.

In its latest iteration, the Bahía El Rincón project calls for the equivalent of 520 hotel rooms, along with a beach club, swimming pools and restaurants. It is a much more modest plan than the grandiose one of a decade ago—Cabo Cortés, a Spanish company’s vision of up to 30,000 hotel rooms, two golf courses and a marina. Cabo Cortés generated a popular outcry, and was canceled in 2012 by then-President Felipe Calderón. A revised version of the plan, renamed Cabo Dorado and apparently backed by Chinese companies, was rejected by the government two years later.

This time, environmental groups fear the smaller proposal is a way to begin developing the property without drawing as much attention. “The strategy of the developers is: a lot, but small, or at least not on the same scale of Cabo Cortés,” says Aburto-Oropeza of Scripps. “If you look at the big picture, it continues to be the massive development that the region cannot support.”

Bahía El Rincón’s environmental-impact statement leaves much unsaid, including any detail about the developer.

continued on page 8 ▶

[continued from page 7](#)



Cabo Pulmo National Park is known for rich reef life. (Photo by Leonardo González)

Contacts

Octavio Aburto-Oropeza

Scripps Institution of Oceanography
La Jolla California
Tel: (858) 534-1043
maburto@ucsd.edu

Diana Aspiros

Semarnat
Mexico City, Mexico
Tel: +(52 155) 4940-6354
diana.aspiros@semarnat.gob.mx

Ricardo Castro

Cabo Pulmo
Baja California Sur, Mexico
Tel: +(52 161) 2149-8060.

Carlos Godínez

Cabo Pulmo National Park
Los Cabos, Baja California Sur
Tel: +(52 624) 130-0195
Cel: +(521 646) 183-9531
cgodinez@conanp.gob.mx

Martin Goebel

LegacyWorks Group
Santa Barbara, California
Tel: (503) 734-9155
martin@legacyworksgroup.com

Sarahí Gómez

Mexican Center for Environmental Law (Cemda)
Mexico City, Mexico
Tel: +(52 55) 5211-2457
contacto@cemda.org.mx

Armando Trasviña

Ensenada Center for Scientific Research and Higher Education (Cicese)
La Paz, Baja California Sur
Tel: +(52 612) 121-3031
trasvi@cicese.mx

The document mentions Cabo Pulmo National Park only once, asserting the reserve is about 20 kilometers (12.4 miles) to the south, a measurement that appears to be based on the distance by road to the village of Cabo Pulmo.

Semarnat did not respond to a request for an interview, but in a short written summary of the East Cape projects, it acknowledged that the marine reserve is only 3.3 kilometers (two miles) away.

Brushing aside that inconsistency and others, Semarnat rebuffed a demand from environmental groups to reject Bahía El Rincón's environmental-impact statement. Instead, it granted conditional approval and ordered the developer to carry out additional technical studies, including environmental-impact studies for the project's water-treatment and desalinization plants.

The four other projects that won conditional approval are clustered around the town of La Ribera, some 15 kilometers (9.3 miles) north along the coast from Cabo Pulmo. One is a tourism development, Playa La Ribera, and the second is a residential project, Condotel La Ribera. A third, Central Comercial La Ribera, is a shopping and residential complex. Together they would add 75 hotel rooms and almost 200 residential properties to a town with a population of fewer than 3,000 people.

Redirecting a river

The fourth La Ribera project, presented by a large resort called Costa Palmas, aims to alter the natural flow of one of the seasonal rivers, or arroyos, that tumble down from the mountains after hurricane-season storms.

Approved in 2007, Costa Palmas is being built on 400 hectares (1,000 acres). The resort will include a 141-room Four Seasons hotel, scheduled to open this month, and an Aman hotel, due to begin operating in 2021, as well as associated villas, an 18-hole golf course and a 250-slip marina.

The problem that prompted the river project is that Costa Palmas is located where the Santiago Arroyo empties into the Gulf of California. After major storms, the arroyo often floods the marina. The resort's developers, a Los Angeles real estate firm called Irongate, received permission to build a water-diversion channel. Irongate did not respond to a written request for an interview.

Armando Trasviña, an oceanographer with the La Paz unit of the Ensenada Center for Scientific Research and Higher Education (Cicese), says that rerouting natural flows into the Gulf would affect the marine ecosystem.

"They want to fight against nature," he says. "They are going to alter the same environment that they want to sell."

During the summer, the Gulf waters are very hot and unproductive, he says, and the fresh water that pours into the sea after a storm provides needed nutrients. This effect can be measured by satellite pictures that show increased chlorophyll in phytoplankton, which are the base of the food chain.

Developers may also want to conserve the natural courses of local arroyos for their own self-interest: the rivers sweep soft sand onto the beaches. Although Costa Palmas is about 15 kilometers (9.3 miles) from Cabo Pulmo, Trasviña says the Santiago Arroyo is one of the most important in the region and its diversion could have indirect effects on the park.

"The whole zone is interconnected," he says, adding that the northbound Gulf currents and winds that prevail locally in the summer reverse direction in the winter.

As Semarnat analyzed the five new projects, it asked for opinions from federal environmental-enforcement officials—but it did not consult with the agency with oversight of Cabo Pulmo National Park, the National Commission of Protected Natural Areas (Conanp).

Alternative model

Carlos Godínez, director of the park, offers an alternative to building large resorts: taking the model of small-scale ecotourism that has brought prosperity to the inhabitants of Cabo Pulmo and reproducing it elsewhere on the East Cape coast. A 2017 government study found that due to the economic impact of tourist services in the park, per capita income for local inhabitants was more than double Mexico's national average.

"The example of Cabo Pulmo shows that living from sustainable tourism, a tourism that doesn't extinguish natural resources, is an economic activity that is very beneficial to locals," Godínez says.

Cabo Pulmo's Castro agrees. The park, he says, opened "a whole range of incredible opportunities. You see opportunities for our youth who do not have to go to the United States for a better life."

Yet observers such as Trasviña worry that unless growth is steered by environmentally sensitive regional land-use planning, untrammeled development and in-migration will occur, degrading Baja's East Cape coastal and marine resources.

The region's existing land-use plan dates from 1995, and an effort to revise it has been stalled for 10 years. Says Trasviña: "Baja California Sur is not in any condition to provide work for all of Mexico."

—Elisabeth Malkin