

3-6-2003

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Boost for Ruta Maya." (2003). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9061>

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Boost for Ruta Maya

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Central America

Published: 2003-03-06

An international organization has recently announced a US\$147 million initiative to boost tourism in Central America and Mexico. This is a joint project encompassing Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras for "sustainable tourism development."

The project is under the aegis of Organizacion Mundo Maya (OMM). OMM is a member of the World Trade Organization and describes its purpose and aims as, "To promote the public and private sectors of the founding member countries, the development of tourism, culture and environment in the Mundo Maya region. To facilitate suitable mechanisms that allow for the effective marketing of tourism products in regional and international markets."

Funding for OMM's project will be sought from international donors and multilateral credit institutions by each of the participating countries, and is not yet in hand. The money has been scheduled to be spent over a five-year period. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) appears to have been the lead institution on the project. IDB rolled out a Mundo Maya Sustainable Tourism Program Jan. 16 in Washington, putting up US\$2.5 million for a feasibility study. This program has been stalled for about three years since the IDB contracted with OMM under what was called in March 2000, "New Directions in the Preservation of the Patrimony of Latin America and the Caribbean."

OMM said US\$147 million is to be spent on archeological restoration, environmental conservation, community participation and consultation mechanisms, productive projects associated with the program, and infrastructure for tourism and other social purposes. In the case of archeological restoration, the project will extend beyond the five-year period, to ten years, according to OMM executive director Belia de Contreras, a Guatemalan. The plan is an attempt at injecting new money into the venerable Ruta Maya scheme that has not seen much development recently.

During 2003, the first year of operation for the program, it is anticipated that the five countries will agree to a plan of action and prioritization of projects. OMM was created in 1992 with a multinational strategy to turn 500,000 sq km into a giant theme park around Maya culture.

According to the OMM vision, infrastructure will include 165 km of roads, of which 40% will be new (see NotiCen, 2002- 10-14). There will be docking facilities in Belize, an airport in Copan, Honduras, and new archeological restorations in at least ten sites within the designated territory. The archeological work will add to the inventory of over 100 sites already restored in the 179 old Mayan cities of the area. Besides the many species of plants and animals in the area, the region is also home to some of the poorest people in Latin America.

The project is designed to bring water and sanitation facilities to these populations, along with electricity and road construction. The communities within the confines of the project are among

the poorest in their respective countries, with income averaging half that of those countries. There are more than 5 million people of Mayan ancestry here, representing 33 different language groups, many of whom are said to preserve traditional social and religious practices.

On the Mexican side, the project includes sites in Quintana Roo, Campeche, Chiapas, Tabasco, and Yucatan. OMM officials have estimated that the project is feasible if it attracts just five per cent of the tourists who visit Cancun and Quintana Roo annually. Their data indicate that between 1997 and 2000, the whole area, including all five countries attracted 23.5 million tourists, with a yearly average increase of about 9%. Of this total, however, about 16.5 million went to Mexico, and Cancun accounted for most of these. In addition to the Mayan sites, the Ruta Maya region also encompasses the Mesoamerican reef system along its 1,000-km coastal zone. This is thought to be the second largest reef system in the world.

There are 301 separate protected zones. The largest of these, the Biosfera Maya of Guatemala, protects 228 bird species, 19 amphibians, 67 reptile species, and innumerable plant species. The area also includes the Peten, northernmost and largest of Guatemala's departments. This area is infamous for having been decimated by illegal harvesting of hardwoods, smuggling of species, and theft of archeological relics. The illegal removal of these artifacts is a US\$10 million business. OMM has not commented on how, or if, the project will deal with the problem in the Peten, or in the rest of the mundo Maya.

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