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Great Mesoamerican Coral Reef Dying As Region's Governments Renege On Commitments

by LADB Staff

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More than a decade after the signing of an agreement on maintaining the health and well-being of the Great Mesoamerican Coral Reef, the system is still in jeopardy; its destruction goes on mercilessly. Governments of the region, say environmentalists, lack the will to stop the damage to the world's second-largest, after Australia's Great Barrier Reef, coral system. In June 1997, the presidents of Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala, and the prime minister of Belize met in Tulum, Mexico, to sign the Caribbean Mesoamerican Coral Reef Initiative (see NotiCen, 1997-06-12).

The Great Mesoamerican Coral Reef extends some 720 km, from the Yucatan Peninsula to Honduras' Bay Islands. The reef is a great moneymaker for the countries along its way, bringing in fishing and tourist dollars. Thinking it could be an even greater cash cow, the governments have allowed overfishing, overcrowding, and urbanization of the coastal zones to take their toll, not just of the reef system but of the wetlands, mangrove forests, lagoons, and other features of the fragile land and seascapes associated with it. The 1997 agreement was supposed to stop all that. It never did.

Except to sign another declaration in 2006, the signatory governments never passed the legislation and never took the steps necessary to protect the reef. Now the more than 60 different species of coral, more than 500 species of fish, and countless species of other aquatic life are under severe environmental threat. Regulatory failure accelerates the damage as banana plantations, cane fields, citrus orchards, and other agriculture endeavors spew their chemicals, their pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides into the coastal waters in increasingly toxic tides.

These stews kill the coral and interfere with its reproductive cycles. The chemical-fertilizer runoff, together with nutrients in the sewage of coastal cities and hotel complexes, cause the aggressive overgrowth of algae and other out-of-control plant life that retards the growth of marine animals while displacing other algae beneficial to the reef ecology. Organizations throw money and projects at the problem. While the politicians sat by and watched, some of the world's environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) Conservation International, the World Wildlife Federation (WWF) and the Nature Conservancy have all funded dozens of projects on and around the reef. The World Bank and other donors have thrown millions of dollars at it, but the predations continue undisturbed. Said marine biologist Melanie McField, "When I started working on the reef 15 years ago, there was about 30% living coral on the reef bottom, twice what there is today." Lax enforcement and all the rest are only part of the cause of the destruction, however.

Global warming has brought devastating increases in sea temperatures, with death and bleaching of the coral as results. In a collection of five reports prepared for the World Bank, *Visualizing Future Climate in Latin America*, it says, "Climate change will have dramatic and costly consequences for the people and ecosystems of Latin America." The World Bank's lead engineer for Latin America and the Caribbean Walter Vergara said that the damage is likely irreversible and that "coral

bleaching is believed to have affected over 80% of coral reefs in the Caribbean Basin, following the heat and hurricane activity of summer 2005, with potentially far-reaching consequences for the fish that live and breed in the reefs. Bleaching also robs coral of its esthetic appeal, threatening the tourist trade." Filling the governmental vacuum with good works The environmental organizations have not given up.

WWF and Nature Conservancy both advocate regulating coastal development and creating marine protected areas. They have identified more than two dozen significant spawning areas and had them closed to fishing. They have trained fishers in the use of less-destructive fishing gear and taught them to make money running tourist dive trips when fishing is not allowed. The ecological organizations have also confronted the agricultural-waste problem. "Inappropriate production practices and a lack of wastewater treatment have led to damaging effluents pouring out through Chetumal Bay and the Gulf of Honduras and onto the reef," said Sylvia Marin of the WWF's Central America region. "We've tried to address that not only by imposing rules but by working with big agroexporters and beverage manufacturers to establish management practices that are better for the environment and more efficient and productive." In June 2007, WWF forged an agreement with two major Honduran palm-oil producers, Palmas de San Alejo and AGROTOT, to reduce their pesticide use and fertilizers and to better control wastewater.

There have been other agreements, some fruitful, with other growers including Dole and Chiquita Brands International. Pilot projects on a total of 100,000 hectares in the region to limit sedimentation from upland watersheds and toxic discharges have, said the WWF, reduced reef contaminants by 5% or better. Conservation International reported securing commitments from cruise lines to refrain from discharging wastewater within 6.4 km of the reef, and it has worked with hotels and developers to reduce discharges. But none of that will amount to much, it will not turn the devastation around, if the governments do not pass and enforce strict land-use, development, and waste-treatment rules.

The Mexican government has stepped up in a variety of ways, but not the Central Americans. Said Nature Conservancy's Alejandro Arrivillaga, a marine-conservation specialist, "Though contaminants from half of Guatemala City end up on the reef, you don't have sanitary inspectors measuring nutrient and E. coli levels." A related problem is the lack of baseline data that would enable measurement and allow monitoring for effectiveness of different approaches to the problem. There is, for instance, widespread suspicion that fish stocks have diminished more than 60% in the last two decades, but the data to verify this is lacking. "We don't have enough data yet to know precisely what has been harmed. That is obviously important in determining policy." WWF and Nature Conservancy, together with the University of Miami, are collaborating on a study of 400 different sites, but there have been no studies on the reef as a whole that would allow estimates of total damage.

It appeared, if only briefly, that the presidents of the reef countries might begin to take the Great Mesoamerican Coral Reef seriously in 2006, when Presidents Vicente Fox for Mexico, Oscar Berger for Guatemala, Manuel Zelaya for Honduras, and Prime Minister Said Musa for Belize signed in July of that year a Renewal Accord of the Tulum Declaration. The accord resolved, among other things, to: * Establish the Consejo de Ministros del Sistema Arrecifal Mesoamericano (SAM), to develop and oversee the mechanisms of collaboration for the conservation and sustainable development

of the SAM; * Establish the Comision Regional para el Desarrollo Sustentable y la Conservacion of the SAM; * Continue to promote joint links among authorities responsible for national patrimony, culture, and tourism; * Petition the International Maritime Organization to declare the SAM area an Especially Sensitive Maritime Zone in order to protect it from increased ship traffic. The destruction of the reef continues unabated.

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