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## Pacific Ecology Under Seige

*by Guest*

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[The author is a public-radio producer and freelance journalist. He wrote this article after traveling to the Mexican Pacific Coast this summer.]

A historic mainstay of Mexico's Pacific Coast communities, fishing today faces a cloudy future threatened by environmental degradation, overexploitation, and technological obsolescence. Mexico is ranked among the top 20 in the world's fishing nations, with about 2,500 marine species identified in the country's oceans.

Approximately 350 species are commercially exploited, including tuna, sardines, shrimp, and squid. Tourism conflicts with commercial fishing. One flashpoint in the crisis is in the port of Zihuatanejo, Guerrero state, where tourism development has transformed subsistence fishing into a cutthroat business pitting sport-fishing enthusiasts against the commercial-fishing industry and locals against outsiders.

Rising tensions boiled over early in the summer of 2004 when a visiting delegation from the environment and natural resources committee (Comision de Ecologia y Recursos Naturales) was greeted by a crowd of dozens of upset sport fishers.

Claiming that authorities had not addressed complaints of illegal fishing dating back five years, the sport fishers charged that as many as 40 small commercial fishers, sometimes armed with high-powered weapons, were ravaging nearby Pacific waters and illegally harvesting sailfish.

Although it is classified as a sport species under Mexican law, sailfish are frequently caught off Zihuatanejo and other places and then sold as the popular "fish filet" in restaurants and markets to unknowing consumers. Jesus Alvarez, a representative of the Zihuatanejo sporting and recreational fishing industry, told the visiting deputies that the time to act was running short. "When we surprise some [illegal fishermen], they have illegal equipment in violation of the law," said Alvarez. "They immediately exhibit high-powered arms, intimidating the conductor of our boats as well as the tourists that we have aboard."

At the heart of the fishing conflict is the dominant tourist economy of Zihuatanejo. A sector of fishermen who once dedicated themselves to catching fish for consumption now views its future in affluent foreigners, who pay high fees for a half-day adventure on the open sea. With fuel prices increasing and larger fish sometimes more difficult to find, competition among fishers is intensifying.

After hearing the testimonies of Alvarez and others, Deputy Rosario Herrera of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), called on Guerrero Gov. Rene Juarez and other authorities to become involved. Within days of the commission's visit, inspectors from the Comision

Nacional de Pesca (CONAPESCA) in conjunction with the Mexican Navy detained two commercial fishers who were in possession of 13 sailfish in a boat near Zihuatanejo.

However, the suspects were released after their catch was seized because the violation is an administrative one subject only to fines and not jail time under current federal law. Although fishing law violations are sometimes uncovered on a small-scale basis, coastal residents also denounce alleged large-scale incursions into Mexican waters by Japanese fishing vessels as well as unsustainable fishing practices by larger Mexican shrimp boats based in Sinaloa state. Zihuatanejo's PRD Mayor Amador Campos charges that the industrial fleets scour the ocean and kill protected species including the sea turtle.

Referring to a recent conversation he had with the Secretaria de Turismo (SECTUR), Campos urged authorities to broaden their scope and scrutinize the big players in the crisis. "[Local fishermen] are desperate," said Campos. "We have waited for them to solve the problem and they haven't been able to. We all have to come together." Shrimping practices undermine environment Further north, in the Sea of Cortes, a private shrimp fleet of 1,546 boats has been at the center of recent controversy.

In the Internet column Econoticias of the S.O.S. Bahia group, Mexican environmental journalist Silvestre Pacheco estimates that the archaic fleet sweeps the floor of the Sea of Cortes 48 times between the months of September and December, taking on average 10,000 metric tons of shrimp and killing 160,000 MT of other species daily per boat. The fishing fleet uses one liter of diesel fuel to capture 1 kg of shrimp, resulting in the annual release of about 200 million cubic meters of greenhouse gases annually, Pacheco said.

Technologically dated, the fleet receives federal subsidies to the tune of US\$50 million per year. This year, said Pacheco, the federal government plans on spending an additional US\$21 million to help modernize the aging fleet.

At a recent meeting in Sonora, Pacheco and other environmentalists called on the federal government and President Vicente Fox to incorporate ecological concerns in the modernization of the shrimp industry. On the federal level, the Comision Nacional de Acuacultura y Pesca (CONAPESCA) is proposing a new fishing law to promote sustainable harvests and delineate enforcement activities.

CONAPESCA is an agency of the Secretaria de Agricultura, Ganaderia, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentacion (SAGARPA). Enforcement has sometimes been the subject of jurisdictional confusion among CONAPESCA, the Mexican Navy, and the environment and natural resources ministry, Secretaria del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT). CONAPESCA and a handful of members of the Mexican Congress are also consulting with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) for advice on passing a new fishing law and promoting a more sustainable industry.

For their part, some sport fishermen like Bernardo Gutierrez of Zihuatanejo say they want to popularize the "catch and release" practice in their industry so species such as sailfish or marlin may live to fight another day. "We have 10 years doing this in order to support and protect the

species," said Gutierrez. "That's why illegal fishing is so worrisome." Given the mounting conflicts and harvesting abuses, legal reforms and technological innovations are increasingly viewed as urgent. Adding to the volatile scene is the use of fishing vessels, both large and small, for smuggling cocaine. Nationwide, some 260,000 Mexicans are directly employed in fishing, according to CONAPESCA.

### *Mangrove estuaries under assault*

While overfishing has created some conflicts, other clashes surround the survival of the environmentally vital mangrove estuaries. A place where salt and fresh water come together, mangrove environments recycle and maintain water quality, provide nutrients, and protect coastline from storm-whipped erosion.

The mangroves, commonly located in or at the mouths of rivers and around bays and lagoons, are breeding grounds for fish and shellfish, habitat for crocodiles, nutrias, and iguanas, and destination sites for migratory waterfowl from Canada and the US.

Mangroves are gradually being eliminated up and down the Pacific. One clear example of the crisis is in the busy port of Manzanillo in Colima state, where a US\$270 million project to expand docks and storage space is threatening the Laguna del Valle de las Garzas and the migratory waterfowl that winter in its mangroves.

In an interview with the weekly news magazine *Proceso*, Colima state legislator Juval Ayala said the expansion represents "ecological suicide of dramatic dimensions, [which could] have consequences for the biodiversity and the local climate." Ayala, who chairs the environmental-protection committee in the Colima state legislature, said the project calls for the dredging of the Juluapan Lagoon to make way for residential subdivisions, commercial businesses, recreational centers, and a marina.

The battle over mangrove habitats has likewise erupted around the Coyuca de Benitez Lagoon near the popular resort of Acapulco. A film scene of the early Tarzan movies, the lagoon and its mangroves host dozens of species of ducks, crocodiles, brown pelicans, nutrias, and iguanas. In 2000-2001, squatters led by local politicians affiliated with the PRD invaded and occupied private land belonging to former Guerrero Gov. Israel Noguera Otero (1971-1975) as well as portions of the federally owned zone on the edges of the lagoon. After felling numerous white and red mangrove trees, an estimated 1,600 families poured into what is now called Colonia Fuerza Aerea. Now inhabited by between 7,000 and 10,000 people, the irregular settlement lacks a sewage sanitation system and regular trash pickup.

In another section of the lagoon, the environmental-protection agency (Procuraduria Federal de Proteccion al Medio Ambiente, PROFEPA) shut down a construction site apparently owned by Mexico City nightclub operator Jose Guadalupe Uribe, whose workers had cut down at least 115 mangrove trees to clear land for tourist cabins. PROFEPA went as far as to file charges against Uribe with the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) for cutting down endangered trees, jeopardizing the mangrove, and dumping debris into the lagoon.

However, local residents reported work continuing on the site even after PROFEPA ordered it halted. Meanwhile, three Acapulco-based environmental groups have taken legal action in the Colonia Fuerza Aerea case. In June, they filed legal charges with the PGR against the Guerrero state chiefs of PROFEPA, SEMARNAT, and the Comision Nacional de Agua (CNA) for alleged dereliction of duty by failing to halt the destruction of the Coyuca de Benitez Lagoon.

"They permitted the invasion and destruction of these areas that are priority for the protection of the marine life of Mexico," said Robyn Sidney, president of the Environmental Defense Association of La Roqueta Island, one of the groups filing the complaint. "We denounced [the squatter invasion] when it started, but they did nothing," added Sidney. Joining the environmentalist are the groups Guerreros Verdes and the Underwater Ecological Protection Association. According to Sidney, the environmental advocates want the squatters evicted from the federal portion of the zone they occupy to reforest the lagoon and create an "ecological window."

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