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U.S. Research Ship Fined for Causing Damage to Coral Reef Off Yucatan

by LADB Staff

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Mexico's environmental protection agency (Procuraduria Federal de Proteccion al Medio Ambiente, PROFEPA) has levied a fine of 2.3 million pesos (US\$209,000) against a US research vessel that damaged a coral reef 40 km off the northern coast of the Yucatan Peninsula. The ship, the Maurice Ewing, destroyed 20 sq meters of underwater rock formations and 10 sq meters of coral on the Bajo de Madagascar Reef in mid-February.

Scientists said the damaged section of the reef would take at least a century to regenerate. PROFEPA officials and environmental advocates were perplexed by the vessel's inability to avoid the reef, which was clearly marked on most maps. "They said they had state-of-the-art technology and highly trained personnel, but they couldn't even detect a sand bank or a coral reef?" said Rosario Sosa, president of the Yucatan-based Asociacion Mexicana de los Derechos de los Animales y su Habitat (AMEDEA).

Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, one of the mission's sponsors along with the National Science Foundation (NSF), said the crew had relied on apparently flawed or misleading navigational charts. "The ship's charts indicated adequate water depth at the location of the grounding," the observatory said in a press statement.

Ship's activities were already under scrutiny

The vessel, which is owned by the NSF, had traveled to the area near the port of Progreso to conduct seismic tests on the Chicxulub Crater, believed to have been caused by the impact of a meteorite or a comet 65 million years ago. The crater is more than 193 km wide and is partly on land and partly under water. The team included scientists from the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), the University of Texas Institute of Geophysics, and the Universities of Cambridge and London in Britain.

The scientific mission had already run into controversy before the incident. Environmental groups and some politicians had unsuccessfully sought to stop the research because the sonar signals sent deep into the ocean were disturbing whales, turtles, dolphins, and other marine life. Advocates said the risk from the sonic booms emitted by the Maurice Ewing was especially high for whales. "[The sounds] damage the brain, or damage the cochlea of the ear, and disorient the animals so that they beach themselves or crash into boats," said AMEDEA's Sosa.

Although these concerns were raised before the research project was launched, Mexican authorities agreed to grant a permit to the NSF and the Lamont-Doherty Observatory. PROFEPA reasoned that the project was within "acceptable limits," although it said the activities of the Maurice Ewing would be monitored.

Greenpeace Mexico is considering legal action against all parties responsible for damage to the area's marine ecosystems. The action could include PROFEPA, which awarded the permits, said Greenpeace Mexico spokesperson Hector Magallon. Federal Sen. Erika Larregui Nagel, a member of the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM), said she pushed PROFEPA to withdraw the permit for the Maurice Ewing, but was not successful. "We had asked that the work permits for the ship be cancelled because of the potential damage to the environment," said Larregui. "Now we're talking about damage to the ecosystem at large, including the coral reefs."

PROFEPA allowed the Maurice Ewing to continue its research for a couple of days after the coral-reef incident, which brought further criticism from environmental advocates. The ship was eventually ordered to stop all activity and leave Mexican waters after paying its fine. Regional PROFEPA delegate Sergio Chan Lugo said the money from the fine will be used to restore the damaged area of the reef and to continue monitoring efforts on the reef. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on March 9, reported at 11.01 pesos per US\$1.00] (Source: Mastermedia.org, 01/25/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 02/24/05; The Herald-Mexico City, 02/25/05; Notimex, 02/17/05, 02/18/05, 02/28/05; Associated Press, 01/13/05, 01/23/05, 02/18/05, 03/01/05; La Jornada, 02/18/05, 02/19/05, 02/22/05, 03/01/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 02/23/05, 03/01/05; The Arizona Republic, 03/01/05)

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