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## **Vessel Causes Major Damage to Coral Reef Off Coast of Quintana Roo**

*by LADB Staff*

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One of the most important coral reefs off the coast of Quintana Roo state incurred severe damage after being struck by two vessels that may have been illegally transporting gravel. The damaged Punta Nizuc reef is in the Parque Marino Natural de Punta Cancun, between the resort areas of Cancun and Isla Mujeres. The Comision Nacional de Areas Naturales Protegidas (CONANP) estimates that the accident, which occurred in early June, may have damaged as much as 1,200 square meters of reef.

### ***Second incident reported off Yucatan coast***

Two weeks after this incident, authorities reported another major accident involving possible serious damage to a coral reef in nearby Yucatan. The two incidents follow a similar accident in the same area in 2005, when a research ship damaged a portion of reef off the northern coast of the Yucatan Peninsula (see SourceMex, 2005-03-09).

Local officials said a tourist boat owned by the company Dolphin Discovery was dragging a second vessel, a barge loaded with gravel, when they both struck the Punta Nizuc reef, which is home to a wide variety of marine life and attracts tourists from around the world. The tourist boat, which incurred damage during the accident, apparently pulled the barge down as it sank.

CONANP officials have lodged a complaint against the two companies with the federal environmental-protection agency Procuraduria Federal de Proteccion al Ambiente (PROFEPA). "This is the most damage we have seen to the coral reefs in our area," said CONANP regional director Alfredo Arellano Guillermo. "[The coral reefs] are very important to the marine biodiversity, and the reason why our park even exists."

PROFEPA and local authorities have been asked to investigate whether Dolphin Discovery and Dragados de Mexico SA, which owns the barge, had a permit to transport gravel in the protected area. The gravel was to be used for commercial projects in Cancun, including constructing condominiums and hotels, said the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario.

The accident has also prompted some action from the environmentally oriented Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM), which has filed a criminal complaint against the two companies. Party officials asked the Secretaria de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) and the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) to determine which parties were responsible for the accident, including local, state, and federal officials. "The inefficiency of the authorities caused irreparable damage to this fragile ecosystem, which was created 125 years ago," said the PVEM.

Another problem for authorities is the difficulty in conducting rescue operations, which require a special vessel that must be brought from Louisiana. The need for the special equipment could

extend the time required for the rescue. "It would be convenient for us to dislodge the vessels as soon as possible, but we have to do it well," one local official told the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma. Authorities are worried that the incident occurred near the start of hurricane season. "We are not sure from one moment to the next if a tropical storm is going to form and cause unstable weather conditions in the area," the official said.

There is also concern that the reef will incur further damage during and after the rescue operation. A related concern is that the vessel owned by Dolphin Discovery, which incurred the most damage during the accident, could leak fuel into the ocean. Authorities are looking at various ways to deal with the damaged reef once the vessels are removed.

One option, said Arellano, would be to create a reef artificially by sinking the barge in the area. Other Reefs damaged In addition to the damage to the Punta Nizuc reef off the coast of Quintana Roo, two other incidents were reported in June. One occurred nearby in Yucatan, where a fishing boat damaged a reef in the Parque Nacional Alacranes, 150 km off the port of Progreso on the eastern coast of Yucatan state.

Authorities are not certain how much of the reef was destroyed, but suspect the damage was extensive. Early indications suggest that as much 279 sq meters of reef might have been damaged, local PROFEPA delegate Carlos Gonzalez Flota told El Diario de Yucatan. "I understand that PROFECO has asked for assistance from the CINVESTAV (Centro de Investigacion y Estudios Avanzados del Instituto Politecnico Nacional) and the UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico) to determine with certainty how much damage has occurred," said park director Rene Cantum Palma.

Cantum Palma said PROFECO would seek damages from the company Pescados Mexicanos (PESCAMEX), which owns the vessel, named Padrino. Authorities also reported another close call at a reef off the coast of Veracruz in mid-June. In this case, the culprit was the marine-biology teaching vessel Tecnico Pesquero I, owned by the Direccion General de Educacion en Ciencia y Tecnologia del Mar (CETMAR). The agency is affiliated with the Secretaria de Educacion Publica (SEP). Local environmental official Elvira Carvajal Hinojosa said the vessel ran aground near the Punta Gorda reef because of a navigation error, but there was little evidence of any major damage. The Punta Gorda Reef is part of a system of 22 reefs that comprise the Parque Nacional Sistema Arrecifal Veracruzano (PNSAV).

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