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Mexico Designates Two New Sites in Southeast as Protected Areas

by LADB Staff
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The Mexican government has named two sites in southeastern Mexico as protected natural areas, incorporating the two regions into the 12% of the Mexican territory that now has that designation. The designation was awarded to the Canon de Usumacinta near Tenosique in Tabasco state, which encompasses about 46,000 hectares, and to the 4,000-ha Boqueron de Tonala near Santo Domingo in Oaxaca state.

The protected-area designation prohibits creating new centers of population in the areas and puts in place measures to protect cultural and natural resources, including species of plants and animals that are in danger of extinction, said the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT). "The Canon de Usumacinta comprises high jungle along with deep canyons and gullies that favor a wide diversity of ecosystems and wildlife," said the Mexico City daily newspaper El Sol de Mexico.

The area, part of the ancient Mayan province of Peten, also contains valuable archeological sites. The Boqueron de Tonala, which is near the basins of the Mixteca and Balsas Rivers in the Mixteca Alta region of Oaxaca, is primarily lower-altitude jungle and mangroves. "The basin protects the irrigation district of the Yosocuta reservoir and the biodiversity of the region," said El Sol de Mexico.

With the two latest designations, there are now 166 protected sites in Mexico, almost one-eighth of the country's national territory. Government to promote environmental education Calderon announced the two designations at a ceremony celebrating the UN decision to designate Mexico as the host of the UN's World Environment Day on June 5, 2009. Rajenda Pachauri, who chairs the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and Achim Steiner, executive director of the UN Environmental Program, were also present at the ceremony.

The Mexican president used the occasion to announce a new initiative to incorporate environmental issues into Mexico's national education curriculum, which includes distributing more than 1 million textbooks addressing conservation, sustainability, and other related topics. "We know that, without awareness of the environment, there will be no respect for natural resources," said the president. "Unfortunately, my generation and other previous generations did not receive education about the environment. Rather, we were taught to destroy it."

The government's efforts to promote environmental education received some praise in the Mexican media. "For the first time ever, Mexican society has been presented with a proactive initiative on the part of environment and education secretariats that allow us to promote environmental awareness to our country's teachers," said Luis Manuel Guerra in a column published in the Mexico City daily newspaper La Cronica de Hoy.
Critics say Calderon has not fully embraced environmental protection

While the Calderon government has worked hard to present itself as a champion of environmental protection, the administration has been criticized for its shortcomings in environmental protection.

In particular, the president has come under criticism for failing to take steps to protect important resources like Lago de Chapala, which supplies water to Guadalajara and other important cities. One of the biggest concerns is the fluctuation in water levels, which tend to become very low in dry years (see SourceMex, 2001-06-27 and 2003-10-22).

In addition to the administration's inability to allay concerns about water supply in western Mexico, detractors say it has failed to take steps to protect the flora and the fauna that inhabit Chapala and the Santiago and Lerma rivers, which feed into the lake.

Among the critics is Beatriz Paredes, president of the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), who criticized the Calderon government for failing to go after companies that are polluting the lake. Paredes said that the government's inaction on Lago de Chapala reflects its disdain for the environment elsewhere in Mexico. "Every three months, we will put together a report with some of the complaints that we have brought to the government," Paredes said on June 6, the date of this year's UN Environmental Day. "We will be evaluating whether authorities are addressing these concerns."

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