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Zacatecas Authorities Reject Protected-Area Designation in Mining Region

by Carlos Navarro

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The tug-of-war between economic development and environmental protection has taken center stage in Zacatecas with the official rejection by Gov. Alejandro Tello Cristerna’s administration of a federal effort to create a protected area in a mineral-rich region of the state.

Mexico’s environmental ministry (Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, SEMARNAT) proposed the creation of the protected area and biosphere as a means to preserve endangered species such as the golden eagle (Aquila chrysaetos canadensis), the Mexican prairie dog (Cynomys mexicanus), the brown bear (Ursus arctos), and rattlesnakes in the semi-arid desert of Zacatecas. The designation of the 2.5 million-hectare site would have extended through a region that includes the municipalities of General Francisco Murguía, Villa de Cos, El Salvador, Melchor Ocampo, Concepción del Oro, and Mazapil.

The new Tello administration, however, rejected the designation on the premise that the primary responsibility of the state government is to promote economic development. In Tello’s view, the designation would put investments in the mining sector at risk. “We have to encourage development in industry, in mining, in agriculture, in the retail sector,” said Tello, who took office on Sept. 12. “For us, there is no greater contributor to our GDP than the mining sector, and I don’t think we can neglect it by declaring this zone in the semi-desert region of Zacatecas as a protected area.”

Tello made a point to emphasize that he does not oppose conservation by proposing a separate area for protection. “We are promoting that a protected area be created in Monte Escobedo and Valparaíso, in all those mountainous areas where we have a variety of species [that require protection],” the governor told reporters. The area proposed for protection by the Tello administration comprises only 150,000 ha.

Development versus environmental protection

Víctor Carlos Armas Zagoya, the Zacatecas secretary of water and environment, said a protected-area designation could affect about 300 concessions that the government has awarded to mining companies over the past 30 years. The mining projects are located in an area spanning 1 million ha., overlapping the proposed protected area of 2.5 million ha.

According to Armas Zagoya, three of those concessions have not yet been developed, and once the mining companies move forward with the projects, they could bring US$8 billion in new investments, along with 5,000 direct jobs and another 10,000 indirect positions in Zacatecas.

The Tello administration has support from the six municipal governments in the area, all of which have rejected the protected area designation.

Despite the strong opposition, the Zacatecas government agreed to hold discussions with Environment Secretary Rafael Pacchiano Alamán and other SEMARNAT officials to discuss the
viability of designating the area a protected zone. The two sides invited representatives from the Cámara Minera de México (CAMIMEX), the mining industry group, to participate in the talks.

**Environmental groups speak out**

The opposition to the designation of the protected area is at odds with the position of prominent environmental organizations in Mexico, which are lobbying SEMARNAT to move forward with the plan. Those groups include the Mexican office of the US-based Center for Biological Diversity, Greenpeace México, Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental (CEMDA), Fundar, México Sostenible, Defenders of Wildlife, and Geosistemas y Desarrollo Ambiental (GEODA).

The environmental organizations emphasized that the designation would allow the protection of several types of flora and fauna. “The semi-arid desert of Zacatecas is home to valuable natural resources and ecosystems that are important for conservation,” they said in a joint statement. “This area is known for its rich variety of native species of flora and fauna, many of which are designated as endangered.”

In particular, the environmental organizations cited the need to protect the habitat of the golden eagle, which is the centerpiece of the Mexican coat of arms. They presented a petition signed by hundreds of citizens in Zacatecas urging SEMARNAT and Carlos Puente, a senator from the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM), to publish the decree creating the protected area.

The environmental organizations accused the mining companies of blocking the publication of the decree.

“There is strong interest on the part of mining companies to begin exploiting the resources in the area,” Alejandro Olivera, a representative of the Center for Biological Diversity said in an interview with SinEmbargo.com. “The government of Zacatecas has been upholding the interests of the mining companies instead of defending the interests and the patrimony of the citizens of Zacatecas.”

**Mexico creates 35 protected areas in three years**

According to the environmental groups, the federal government has been actively pushing for the creation of protected habitats around Mexico ahead of a UN meeting on biological diversity being held in Cancún Dec. 4-17 but is caving into pressure on the proposed area in Zacatecas. Conversely, CAMIMEX is insisting that all areas in Zacatecas with mining concessions be excluded from the proposed protected area. The meeting on biological diversity will be held under the auspices of the Conference of the Parties (COP 21) agreement on environmental protection, which was signed in Paris in December 2015 (SourceMex, Jan. 6, 2016, NotiCen, Jan, 7, 2016, NotiSur, Jan. 8, 2016).

As part of its commitment to recent climate-change agreements, Mexico has moved forward with efforts to protect natural areas this year, including five sites known for their high biological diversity. According to the commission in charge of managing protected areas (Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas, CONANP), President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration has designated 35 protected areas since taking office in December 2012, including 18 sites in 2016. There are now 177 protected sites in Mexico, covering 25.6 million ha. “This comprises more than 12% of the surface of our country,” said CONANP director Alejandro del Mazo.

The five newest designations were announced in late October. Those sites are El Potosí National Park, in San Luis Potosí; Dzibilchaltún National Park, in Yucatán; Flora and Fauna Protection Area in...
the Cacaxtla Plateau, in Sinaloa; Flora and Fauna Protection Area in Balandra, in Baja California Sur; and Flora and Fauna Protection Area in the north coastal, terrestrial and marine strip in Cozumel, in Quintana Roo.

According to CONANP authorities, the designation of protected areas is difficult in some states where criminal organizations control the countryside. This includes the mountain areas of Tamaulipas, Michoacán, and Guerrero states. “Many residents of communities and communal farms (ejidos) in the area have fled,” said César Sánchez Ibarra, who is in charge of proposing protected areas at CONANP. According to Sánchez Ibarra, CONANP personnel are aware of the dangers in these regions and have proceeded with extreme care to avoid becoming victims of crime, including kidnappings.

Some state governments have also taken steps to protect environmentally sensitive areas. In early October, Sonora authorities designated the mountain range Sierra del Laurel as a protected area. According to state environment secretary Jorge Durán, the area is home to 150 species of flora and fauna, of which 14 are endangered.

While the conflict between development and environmental protection sometimes involves extractive industries like mining, the disagreements often center on construction of large complexes. This was the case with the Dragon Mart project, a sprawling retail and residential complex proposed for an area outside Cancún in Quintana Roo (SourceMex, Jan. 16, 2013, May 1, 2013, Sept. 25, 2013). Strong opposition from the environmental community persuaded authorities to put a stop to that project (SourceMex, Jan. 28, 2015).

**Mega project stopped near UNESCO site**

At times, the big conflicts involve tourist-oriented developments, which was the case with a proposal for an area near the Cabo Pulmo National Park, just east of the resort city of San José del Cabo in Baja California Sur state. Developers had proposed a 500-dock marina, two golf courses, and lodging facilities with 27,000 rooms. Environmental advocates raised concerns that the huge development, known as Cabo Dorado, would cause irreparable damage to the park. The project was a scaled-down version of a plan that former President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) rejected in 2012. That project was known as Cabo Cortés.

A special concern is the coral reef at Cabo Pulmo, considered the best-preserved marine formation of its kind in North America. The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated the Cabo Pulmo National Park as a World Heritage site in 2005. In 2008, the Convention on Wetlands, called the Ramsar Convention, designated the Cabo Pulmo park as a Ramsar International Wetlands site. The convention is an intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources.

After SEMARNAT rejected the Cabo Dorado plan (SourceMex, May 14, 2014), the developers—including a group of Mexican entrepreneurs and a Chinese real estate consortium—asked a federal tax court (Tribunal Federal de Justicia Fiscal y Administrativa) to require SEMARNAT to conduct a new environmental study. The developers had scaled down their plans and had hoped that SEMARNAT would provide an environmental endorsement.

SEMARNAT complied with the order and proceeded to study the revised proposal. In August 2015, the environment ministry again rejected the project on the premise that it could cause potentially
devastating environmental damage. Among the concerns raised by SEMARNAT was the high demand for water required by the development.

“The conditions do not exist to move forward with the development near Cabo Pulmo, even if the density is reduced,” Environment Secretary Pacchiano Alamán told the daily newspaper Excélsior at that time.

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