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Mexico Designates Archipelago off Pacific Coast as a National Park

by Carlos Navarro

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The Mexican government has moved to designate four remote islands that are part of an internationally recognized biosphere as a national park. The islands of Socorro, San Benedicto, Roca Partida, and Clarión form part of the Revillagigedo Archipelago, which the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated as a world heritage site in 2016. The site is located 390 km (242 miles) southwest of the southernmost point of the Baja California Peninsula and 700 km (435 miles) west of the port of Manzanillo in Colima state.

The archipelago, which is sometimes described as the “Galapagos of North America” in reference to the richly biodiverse islands off the coast of South America, is part of a submerged mountain range, with the four islands, which are the peaks of volcanoes, emerging above sea level.

According to UNESCO, the site represents “an exceptional convergence” of two marine biogeographic regions: the Northeastern Pacific and the Eastern Pacific. “More particularly, the property lies along the junction where the California and Equatorial currents mix, generating a complex and highly productive transition zone,” the UN agency said in its website.

The isolated nature of the islands has allowed 750 species of animals to thrive, including four endangered species of turtles. Additionally, there are 233 types of plants on the site, many of which are unique to the area.

“The islands provide critical habitat for a range of wildlife and are of particular importance for seabirds, said UNESCO. “The surrounding waters have a remarkable abundance of large pelagic species, such as manta rays, whales, dolphins, and sharks ... a concentration of wildlife that attracts recreational divers from around the world.”

Praise from environmentalists

President Enrique Peña Nieto signed the decree declaring the site as a national park in late November, drawing praise from a wide range of columnists and environmental advocates.

“This wonderful protected natural area is one of Mexico’s invaluable assets, and also an enormous responsibility,” the president said in a speech before signing the Revillagigedo National Park decree.

Alejandro del Mazo Maza, director of the agency in charge of protected areas (Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas, CONANP), said the reclassification would enable a total fishing ban to be enforced around the Revillagigedo Islands.

“This project will benefit our ocean and all the marine species that know no political boundaries,” del Mazo said.

The designation of the area as a national park also makes it easier for the government to follow recommendations made by UNESCO when the site was still a protected area managed by CONANP.

“Of particular importance is the effective collaboration with the Mexican Navy, who provide staffing and infrastructure support to monitor the islands and ensure the enforcement of regulations,” UNESCO said at that time. “This cooperation among agencies is doubly important to augment relatively modest staffing and government financial resources which are applied to the property.”

UNESCO added, “Improved monitoring is needed to prevent sport fishers entering no fishing zones and to manage their impacts. Efforts are also needed to ensure that fishing in the very large surrounding buffer zone is managed to be sustainable so as to counteract the potential or real threat of over-fishing in the region.”

The UNESCO directive also recommended steps to preserve the integrity of the species of animals and plants that inhabited the area. “Management emphasis should be applied to the control and where possible eradication of alien invasive species from the islands and their marine environments,” it said. “A biosecurity plan should also direct quarantining and response mechanisms to ensure protection from potential introduction of threats. This is particularly important to maintain the island’s rat free status, which is both unusual in a sub-tropical island system and crucial to maintaining healthy functioning ecosystems and protecting key species.”

Comparisons to Galapagos Islands

According to environmental advocate Gabriel Quadri de la Torre, the Mexican president’s support for the creation of a national park sent a signal that he was willing to go against the wishes of the fishing industry, which at times has dictated to the federal government the parameters contained in conservation measures. “This is a measure without precedent in our country,” Quadri de la Torre wrote in a guest column in the daily business newspaper *El Economista*. “The importance of this archipelago is recognized worldwide, and it is often compared to the Galapagos Islands.”

Quadri de la Torre, who once led the environmental organization Centro de Estudios del Sector Privado para el Desarrollo Sustentable (CESPEDES), said the new national park would be the largest protected area in North America.

“What’s important is that the decree prohibits all types of fishing—whether these are commercial or sporting activities,” he said. “The decree also prohibits any type of exploitation of natural resources as well as the construction of any tourism infrastructure.”

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) said the designation of the Revillagigedo Archipelago as a national park was a significant step for Mexico and for Latin America as a whole. According to the WWF, the move in the long run benefits the Mexican fishing industry, as the protected area will help some species of fish to recover.

“We recognize Enrique Peña Nieto for making this decision, which will contribute to the recovery of some species that are important commercially, including tuna,” said Jorge Rickards, the WWF’s representative in Mexico. “It is important that the various sectors reach agreements, so that the park can become an instrument to help us recover our marine patrimony.”

Others praised Mexican Environment Secretary Rafael Pacchiano for his role in advocating for the creation of the national park. “Pacchiano pushed for the creation of the Parque Nacional

Revillagigedo despite the opposition of the Mexican tuna industry,” columnist Maricarmen Cortés wrote in the daily newspaper Excélsior.

Despite the assurance from Pacchiano that no development would be allowed in the park, some skeptics raised concerns that hotels and other infrastructure would eventually be allowed on the islands.

A group of scientists, led by biologist Octavio Aburto of the University of California, San Diego, requested a meeting with the environment secretary to discuss their concerns.

“Proposing a change of protection [status] to a national park could open the doors to urban and tourism development on the islands, contradicting the UNESCO World Heritage certification for the archipelago,” the scientists wrote in a letter. They had advocated that the protected area be expanded to 28 million hectares, almost twice as large as the actual size of the park.

Some observers pointed out that even a park of about 14.8 million ha. is acceptable to the scientific community.

“I believe that the scientists will be satisfied with the new national park because of the certainty that this biological treasure will be safe from the tuna fleets and the tourism megaprojects,” columnist Horacio Salazar wrote in the daily newspaper Milenio, noting that the government has kept its commitment to prevent development of megaprojects in another protected area, Cabo Pulmo, in Baja California Sur ([SourceMex, May 14, 2014](#), and [Nov. 30, 2016](#)).

“Twenty families in the area exchanged their livelihood of fishing for ecotourism, and with the help of scientists, they succeeded in having the area designated as a natural protected area,” Salazar wrote. “They saved the site from a major hotel project, allowing the reef to recover its splendor. With the support of science and communities, sensitive areas can be protected.”

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