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## **Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Belize Join Efforts to Protect Coral Reefs**

by LADB Staff

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On June 5, heads of state from Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico met in Tulum a Mexican tourist resort in Quintana Roo state where they signed a convention committing their governments to protect the massive coral reefs that hug the Pacific coasts of those four countries. The summit and the convention were largely inspired by a conference in Panama City last year, where about 1,200 scientists from 60 nations discussed the dangers currently facing the world's coral reefs. At the close of the conference, the attending delegations designated 1997 as the "Year of the Reef," launching a worldwide campaign to save coral reefs from "catastrophic collapse" (see NotiCen, 10/10/96).

Coral reefs, which are communities of microorganisms, are a key component of tropical marine ecosystems and essential for the survival of many species, including many types of commercial fish. In addition, offshore reefs soften the impact of waves, protecting beaches and coastal communities. They also serve as major tourist attractions, and are the source of industrially valuable products.

A variety of factors, however, threaten the world's reefs, including sedimentation from deforestation, excessive fishing, damage by boat anchors and fishing nets, specimen collecting, and pollution. The warming caused by El Nino weather phenomenon has also killed many coral reefs in the Pacific.

### *Plan emphasizes sustainable use of marine resources*

The new convention dubbed the Caribbean Mesoamerican Coral Reef Initiative commits the four countries to draw up a plan of action within 30 days that will outline agreements regarding the sustainable exploitation of marine resources in the Pacific and actions to enforce protection of coral reefs. The reefs which span some 1000 km from southern Quintana Roo to Honduras make up the second-largest coral-reef formation in the world. The strategy will emphasize greater planning regarding tourism activities in the area, including better controls on the number of tourists visiting the reefs and construction of tourism-related infrastructure.

According to estimates by Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Ecologia (INE), if managed appropriately, ecotourism around the coral reefs could generate up to US\$6 billion per year in income for Mexico and the Central American countries. The plan will also stress regulation of commercial fishing activities. And, it will outline specific steps to impede the continued deterioration of the coral reefs while creating conditions for their long-term regeneration and restoration. During the signing ceremony, which took place on Earth Day, the attending presidents stressed that the convention represents an important step forward in the effort to design sustainable-development programs in the region.

"Today, Earth Day, we can hold our heads high and state that we have moved from rhetoric to concrete action," said Guatemalan President Alvaro Arzu. "We have an intergenerational

responsibility to enforce conservation and sustainable use of the coral reefs. If we use those resources rationally and adequately we will be abiding by one of the basic premises of sustainable development to provide employment opportunities and income for individuals and families without damaging or destroying our unique natural heritage." [Prensa Libre (Guatemala), 05/31/97, 06/04-06/97; El Universal, Excelsior (Mexico), 06/05/97; Novedades (Mexico), 06/06/97]

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