



Coral Reef Field Perspectives: Xcalak Marine Protected Area, Quintana Roo, Mexico

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XCALAK

MARINE PROTECTED AREA

Quintana Roo, Mexico

The coastal ecosystem along the Xcalak peninsula, located on the Yucatan Peninsula in the state of Quintana Roo, includes coral reefs, fringing mangroves, coastal lagoons and narrow beaches. It is rich in diversity and is a highly productive breeding and feeding ground for many species of reptiles and fish, including nesting turtles, as well as 155 bird species. At the tip of the peninsula, 250 miles south of Cancun, is Xcalak, a tiny coastal village of 300 people, all of whom depend on the sea.

During the mid-1990s, the community of Xcalak became greatly concerned about the perceived decline in fish catch along their coast. Fishermen observed that they were now spending more time on the water to catch the same amount of fish they had caught only a few years ago in much less time. The community was also informed by the government that they had been targeted by the state for tourism development. The Xcalakeños realized they must prepare themselves to effectively participate in the planning of the community's development.

The community requested assistance from the federal and state governments to aid the declining fishing industry and encourage low-impact tourism, rather than become "another Cancun." Specifically, Xcalak requested assistance in the design of a marine protected area to ensure the management of sustainable tourism and fisheries. With USAID support, Amigos de Sian Ka'an and the University of Rhode Island's Coastal Resources Center helped the community develop a proposal for a marine protected area which would achieve the goals of this small fishing village. Xcalakeños participated in every aspect of the process required to designate the area a national park. In March 1997, the Xcalak Community Committee completed their consultative process and submitted a proposal to designate the Xcalak coral reef area a national park. The proposed park includes over 17,000 hectares (one ha = 2.5 acres) in an area with 40 kilometers of barrier reef in excellent condition, including 12 kilometers with a unique trench structure where biological wealth is exceptional. In addition to the park designation document, the community prepared a development strategy. It revealed to government officials, potential developers and others interested in the area that the people of Xcalak encourage low-impact development as long as it involves them in the planning and implementation, and that the locals understand the direct link between their economic well-being and the health of the environment.

The park designation request by Xcalak was expressed in simple and precise terms by the people who know and depend on the sea for their livelihood, and know that for them to survive, so must their coastal resources. While their proposal is now in the final stages of the approval process, they are already taking action to implement some of the plan's measures, including water zoning for fisheries and tourism activities, fisheries monitoring and training for building an ecotourism industry within the community.



The Xcalak marine protected area on the coast of Quintana Roo