



A Community Strategy for Coastal Zone Management of Xcalak, Mexico.

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**Community-Based Land Use Planning in Conservation Areas:
Lessons from Local Participatory Processes that Seek to Balance
Economic Uses with Ecosystem Protection**

**Development Partners P.C.
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INTRODUCTION

The Xcalak peninsula is located on the southern Caribbean coast of Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, adjacent to the Belize border. Its waters contain some of the most pristine coral reef, coastal, and marine systems in Mexico. Xcalak is home to approximately 300 residents, mainly young mestizo families. Many make their living as fishermen. It is a quiet community, very isolated, yet relaxed and friendly.

The planning effort so far consisted of a three-year process of community organizing, defining alternatives for the town, and discussing strategies to promote fishery conservation and compatible tourism development. The community of Xcalak established a committee, whose work included a marine zoning plan and a set of fishery management recommendations. It was a bottom-up process in that the initiative came from local people, assisted by scientists and coastal planners. Xcalak residents asked both government and private sector organizations for assistance with the development of low-impact ecotourism and fisheries conservation. More recently, they have begun to work via formal channels for coastal planning and conservation with the federal government in Mexico.

GENESIS & PURPOSE

In the mid-1990s, the community's attention was focused on two events—one gradual, one sudden. First, the gradual decline of local fisheries—especially lobster and conch—was affecting many fishermen, who were spending more time fishing for a reduced catch. Independent¹ fishers from inside & outside the community increased competition and pushed stocks even lower. Second, the state government announced plans for the “Costa Maya,” a large-scale development on 150 km of the coast, including Xcalak as a major center.² The community was not consulted about this plan, and was concerned about the impacts on their tiny town.³ Many Xcalak residents expressed interest in ecotourism as an economic alternative to fishing; however they wanted to ensure that tourism gains were realized not only by developers, but also by local people.

After the announcement of the Costa Maya development in 1995, the local fishing cooperative wrote to the state governor, requesting assistance with fishery restoration and developing a “tourist reserve” where fishermen could pursue alternative work (e.g. sportfishing, ecological tours) that is compatible with conservation. The delegate of Xcalak then wrote to INE, the national government agency responsible for protected areas, to seek assistance in gaining protected area status for the marine resources located off the town's shore. Community leaders also contacted Amigos de Sian Ka'an, an

¹ Independent fishers are those who are not part of a fishing cooperative organization.

² The original proposal called for 12,500 hotel rooms; this was later revised to 30,000.

³ Loss of small town character, water supply issues, pollution, and fisheries impacts are among the top concerns.

environmental NGO that had been active in the state⁴ for almost 10 years. People began to meet and talk informally about planning for the future of their town. Early on, people in the community identified the protection of coastal resources (principally to guarantee economic benefits) as a priority. They didn't have a particularly strong conservation ethic, per se; however as the planning process developed, they became interested in a national park as a means of achieving their goals.

LEADERSHIP

External Advisors. In 1995 the University of Rhode Island's Coastal Resources Center (CRC) established a working relationship with Amigos de Sian Ka'an (ASK).⁵ The two organizations decided to collaborate on a pilot project to promote community coastal management in Quintana Roo, and to develop a strategy for low-impact tourism for the Maya Coast. In late 1995, CRC and ASK representatives were invited to visit Xcalak together. More visits took place as people in the community and these two organizations got to know one another. After about 8 months of feasibility meetings, a significant partnership had formed among the residents of Xcalak and ASK and CRC staff.

Community Leadership. The community did not know much about protected areas, but they were curious to find out more about whether a tourist reserve—or some other formal category of protected area--could achieve their goals. They learned about various possible categories of protection from their advisors. An ASK consultant went to live in Xcalak for four months to get an initial assessment of the community and its goals. Then, in August 1996, a trip was organized to visit the Hol Chan Marine Reserve near San Pedro, Belize. This visit was a turning point. Xcalak residents had been to San Pedro before, and liked what they saw: compatible ecotourism businesses. But never before had they visited the waste disposal facilities, seen the new water system, and noticed the other infrastructure in San Pedro. Shortly, the Community Committee for the Protection and Management of the Coastal Resources of Xcalak (XCC) was born.⁶

THE PLANNING PROCESS

Community Committee. The XCC is a non-hierarchical committee, with no officers or formal institutional arrangements. Meetings are usually held every two weeks. A representative of the community was hired by ASK to be in charge of coordination and communication with their outsider advisers. ASK helped organize the early meetings, and later the community took over. All of the members of the XCC are Xcalak residents. While a local tour operator and the president of the fishing cooperative are in effect representatives of their interest groups, the meetings are open to all. The independent fishermen and dive shop operators participate as well. The local (elected) Municipal Delegate represents the population at large. Outside government officials were not invited to the early meetings, although they were informed of the meetings and their purpose.

⁴ Amigos was founded to help ensure the conservation of the 528,000 ha. Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, the southern boundary of which is km. to the north of Xcalak.

⁵ The two organizations, which share some key goals, were encouraged to collaborate directly by U.S. AID, which has been an important supporter of the work of both organizations.

⁶ See page 17 for a schematic drawing illustrating the actors from each sector in the Xcalak planning process.

State and federal government officials were invited to subsequent meetings, however, once the community had established specific priority actions.

The team worked to identify resources management issues of concern to the community. Their vision was documented in “A Community Strategy for Management of the Xcalak Zone” (1997). It contains their formal declaration of the group’s objective: to have a forum where the community can design and propose management actions with the purpose of promoting the conservation of natural resources and the development of the region. The main policy recommendation of this document is a proposal for the Xcalak Reefs National Park. The community, working directly with the ASK and CRC project scientists, collected the ecological and other data needed for the national marine park application.

Zoning Plan. The strategy document proposes a marine zoning plan for the park and a coastal zone management framework,⁷ which was developed by the community with help from its advisers. It can be best described as a local management regime for marine uses and fishing practices.⁸ It includes zoning of specific marine and land areas, including fishing zones and conservation zones, and limits certain fishing techniques (e.g. harpoon and gill nets). Both the fishing cooperative and many of the independent fishers--among whom there had been some conflict in the meetings--negotiated and ultimately signed a formal agreement on these water uses. There is a main fishing zone, which is the largest zoned area, extending from the Belizean border to the south up to the northern limit of what the Xcalakenos consider their zone of influence, Punta Gavilan. Only sportfishing will be permitted in some designated zones, mainly in the coastal lagoons. In an attempt to promote tourism and conserve fisheries, a no-take zone has been established. No fishing will be permitted in certain parts of a unique coral reef formation popular with divers, La Poza, the northern extreme of which fronts the community’s shore.

The community’s strategy document contains hallmarks of influence of the conservation professionals of CRC and ASK. It takes a regional perspective, including proposed zoning and fishery conservation areas outside the boundaries of Xcalak. For example, the partners extended the zoning north, to encompass the zone of influence for fisheries.⁹ It is evidence of both a product and a process of community-based coastal planning.¹⁰ In 1998 ASK and CRC also produced a well-designed field manual of “practical norms” for management of infrastructure and development¹¹ in the area; it is intended to encourage agencies and private companies that come to the Xcalak to voluntarily observe the best ecological practices both during development and afterwards. To some extent the XCC members and ASK have been cooperating during this process to advance shared coastal planning purposes.

⁷ Including both terrestrial zoning and additional marine zoning to complement the proposed marine park.

⁸ See Figure One, on page 17B, for details.

⁹ Scientific evaluations indicated that the Rio Huache lagoons and wetlands, about 10 km. north, were critical habitat for the Xcalak reef species. This was ultimately reflected in the XCC plan.

¹⁰ Both CRC and The Nature Conservancy, which work in partnership with ASK, have demonstrated success with community based coastal management in Latin America.

¹¹ Topics addressed include water supply, waste disposal, siting structures and roads, etc.

GOVERNMENT/ POLITICS

State government participation began in March 1997 when an official attended the XCC's meeting. The agenda was to discuss what was needed to move forward on the park declaration. Following the meeting, the XCC sent a letter with their marine park proposal to federal agency INE.¹² INE encouraged the community to initiate a wider effort to consult and cooperate with all the actors involved in the zone, and to arrive at a final plan together with those parties. Over the next 20 months, INE and the state representatives attended some XCC meetings to discuss various issues, including the State's opposition to the proposed park boundaries. By November 1998, no accord had been reached. The XCC then decided to wait until the next state government took office (April 1999) to pursue their proposal further.

Regional planning. Two sets of recommendations (long-term and short-term) for further planning were written into the community strategy. Among the long-term actions, the XCC proposed a regional subcommission for Integrated Coastal Management on the Maya Coast. The new subcommission would facilitate communication between the Xcalak residents, the different levels of government, investors, area inhabitants, scientists and academics, and NGOs interested in the area. This would enable local community participation in decision-making that affects the use and conservation of marine resources both in Xcalak and within the region.¹³ To initiate this strategy, ASK and the XCC participated in the consultation phase of ecological zoning plans for the coast. In the future they want to coordinate their management actions with those of other protected areas in the region, as well as with the urban plan for Xcalak.¹⁴

Short-term actions include efforts to increase the community's capacity to be an effective destination for ecologically based tourism. A community beautification program is underway, as is training in areas such as effective tourist guiding, English language, and techniques for participating in conservation and monitoring of the coral reefs. ASK and CRC, with obvious pride, tell of a local fisherman of Xcalak who attended the last year's tour guiding course. He has now become a fledgling tourism entrepreneur.

STATUS

The community's proposal for a national park has stalled because of politics, powerful economic interests, and poor communication. State officials reportedly perceive the park as an impediment to development in the zone. The Xcalak park proposal is thus caught between levels of bureaucracy, i.e. federal conservation officials and state level development authorities.¹⁵ The underlying struggle, however, is that of who will decide what kind of development comes to Xcalak, who will benefit economically, and whether it will be 'sustainable.' Project managers from ASK and CRC are nonetheless pleased with the level of communication at all levels that has grown out of this community planning process.

¹² The National Institute for Ecology, part of SEMARNAP, the secretariat for environment and fisheries.

¹³ This recommendation of the XCC is an example of one that was influenced/guided by ASK.

¹⁴ This is one of three huge obstacles to effective planning in Mexico: 1) the disjointed communication between levels of government on land use and related policies; 2) the top-down decision-making tradition, 3) A vast majority of municipalities in Mexico has no staff or funding dedicated to land use planning.

¹⁵ The former appear sympathetic, the latter less so.

In hindsight, would it have been beneficial to have state government participation from the beginning of the process? Some say yes; they wish state authorities had been involved at an earlier stage. Of course, planning in Xcalak might also have gone differently if the development of the Costa Maya had been initiated with more local consultation. Instead, distrust, confrontation, and stalemate have resulted at times. The Costa Maya is steadily creeping toward approval after a rocky start: it is in the midst of the public consultation part of the federal ecological zoning approval process.¹⁶ A new state government was installed on 5 April 1999. The community-led team is working anew on plans to negotiate with the new officials and move toward an appropriate solution. Political changes may thus play a role in shaping Xcalak's bid for national-level marine park status.

At the local level, however, community-based urban planning is going forward. ASK is working with the community and outside volunteers to provide input into the municipal plan. Their first targets are solid waste disposal and other concerns related to the town's public image. Buoys have been set up and the community is enforcing the fishery zone closest to town.

THE FUTURE

Many challenges remain. In the short-term the political obstacles to a national marine park declaration seem perhaps the most difficult to navigate. Over the long term, however, Xcalak may look back on that as only the beginning. It will be critical for the community to develop a framework for local decision-making, and establish working relationships with other actors that are important to the development process in their zone. This means local leaders must step onto new stages, working with politicians at all levels, external economic powers, and newcomers to their own community. They will struggle to accommodate outside pressure for growth, and seek new economic opportunities that are compatible with their vision. Last, but not least, they will have to develop and clarify their community vision: to truly define what "sustainable use of coastal resources" will mean here.

¹⁶ An OET, Ordenamiento Ecologico Territorial, is required for this development to be approved. Coastal projects are among a list of development types for which special environmental impact assessment is required in Mexico. Public participation in planning—while in its infancy in Mexico—is required as part of the OET process.

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