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## **Fishing for a Future: On Mexico's Yucatan coast, Xcalak fights to save its economy and its soul.**

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## Fishing for a future

On Mexico's Yucatan coast, Xcalak fights to save its economy and its soul

By Elisabeth Malkin

In just one day in 1955, the village of Xcalak on the southeasternmost tip of Mexico was ruined when a hurricane wiped out its coconut plantations. The survivors turned to the sea, fishing for lobster and conch in the shimmering waters of Mexico's Caribbean. But by 1995, the fishermen of Xcalak could see that they risked losing their livelihood again. As a result of overfishing, it was taking them increasingly longer to haul in the same catch. So they came up with a plan.

The Xcalak fishing cooperative sought a protected marine area, enabling them not only to manage the fishery but also to develop their own haven of sustainable tourism. "This is one of the first examples where the community itself asks for the creation of a Natural Protected Area," says Carlos Lopez Santos of [Amigos de Sian Ka'an](#), the Cancun-based NGO that has worked with the villagers since 1996. At first,



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## About the contributor

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Elisabeth Malkin is a contributing writer for *The New York Times* based in Mexico City.

the state government of Quintana Roo was reluctant to make any concessions in its own tourism plan for the area.

"But the community didn't tire," says Lopez, who directs the NGO's Integrated Coastal Resource Management Program for southern Quintana Roo.

"We're a new generation," says Oscar Nemesio Salazar Aguilar, president of Xcalak's fishing cooperative, Andres Quintana Roo. "People have explained the problem of the environment to us and that awoke our interest in conservation. We can't exhaust the fish supply. It would be like exhausting a goldmine."



It took six years of effort, but in November 2000 the federal government announced the formation of Xcalak Reefs National Park, a Natural Protected Area under Mexican law. With a US\$25,000 grant from the CEC, the Xcalakeños have

developed a management plan for the park's 17,949 hectares, which includes wetlands and mangroves as well as the beach habitats and coral reefs. The CEC grant will also pay for a study of fishing activities that should be completed by November, along with buoys and signs to delineate the park's different zones. This past summer, the first fishermen were trained by Mexico's environmental enforcement agency, Profepa, as volunteer guards.

The 300 inhabitants of Xcalak have a lot of supportive friends. Among them is the University of Rhode Island's [Coastal Resources Center](#), which has been working with Amigos de Sian Ka'an for several years to promote integrated coastal management in Quintana Roo. Funding for that project has been underwritten by the [US Agency for International Development](#).

From the start, the Xcalakeños knew what they wanted-- and didn't want. Across the border in Belize, tourism in the

© Courtesy of Amigos de Sian Ka'an  
*Xcalak's fishermen are working with researchers to document their practices and fishing conditions.*

## Related CEC resources

**North American Fund for Environmental Cooperation**

<http://www.cec.org/grants/index.cfm?varlan=english>

## Related web resources

**Amigos de Sian Kaân**

<http://www.amigosdesiankaan.org/>

**US Agency for International Development**

<http://www.usaid.gov>

**Coastal Resources Center**

<http://www.crc.uri.edu>

neighboring community of San Pedro has overwhelmed the local fishing industry. Residents of Xcalak, by contrast, wanted adventure tourism to diversify the economy but not dominate it. "We want to conserve everything in the most natural state possible," says Salazar. "We want to make it different from the north of the state." Unlike sun and sand meccas like Cancun, in northern Quintana Roo, only 30 percent of Xcalak is currently involved in tourism, catering mostly to divers, sport fishermen, and birdwatchers.

Xcalak's entry into ecotourism is coming at an opportune time. "I haven't seen this excitement towards ecotourism in Mexico ever," says Ron Mader, author of a travel guide to Mexican ecotourism and an authority on the subject. "Why? Mostly because of the locals. People want to show off what they have." The focus now is for Xcalakeños to improve the quality of their tourist services. Amigos de Sian Ka'an has already trained a dozen fishermen as guides. There are some 150 hotel rooms throughout the area covered by the park, mostly small, rustic cabañas. Under the park's management plan, just 200 people a day will be allowed in, so there is no talk of more hotels. Only nature trails are in the design works.

The management plan is detailed enough to help keep tourism in check. Approved in May, it outlines which areas are to be used for commercial fishing, sport fishing, and diving and snorkeling--a magnificent underwater canyon known as La Poza has been set aside for divers, for example. But the plan's primary goal is still to manage commercial fishing. It defines how much can be caught; whether net, harpoon, or rod can be used; and the sanctions for illegal fishing.

Still to come is the survey of fishing activities in the park, which is being prepared by a local research institute, Colegio de la Frontera Sur. During the June-December fishing season, researchers will go out with the fishermen to observe what species are being caught by each boat, using what method, and in what part of the park. The study should also estimate the extent of illegal fishing.

"This will serve as a base to see how much damage has been done in the past and give us a clear definition of what we have to protect from now on," says the fishing cooperative's Salazar. Results will then be incorporated into the park's management plan. So far, the researchers have examined the "spawning aggregation" of grouper--when the fish swarm to a certain area of the park each December and January to reproduce. Several years ago, Xcalakeños decided to permit only hook and line fishing during spawning season, to conserve grouper; now there are plans to promote the aggregation as an attraction to divers.

Those kinds of decisions are expected to bode well for the park and the fishery, although enforcement will be a constant challenge. "It's very easy to work with a community with roots," says Lopez of the project's success so far.

"They have seen development which has displaced people. They want to be part of their own development. They want to take the leadership."

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