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# Cross Sectoral Initiatives in Democracy and Environment: Chetumal Bay, Mexico

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# Cross Sectoral Initiatives in Democracy and Environment: Chetumal Bay, Mexico

By Pamela Rubinoff, Rafael Romero, and Octavio Chavez

The environment/democracy linkage has recently been initiated in Mexico's US Agency for International Development (USAID) program. This provides an opportunity to evaluate a new way of doing business, where sectoral issues such as tourism, fishing, or reef management are embedded into a larger context of democratic principles of transparency, accountability, and participation. The goal is to support effective governance and contribute towards "sustainable development."

USAID-supported efforts in Southern Quintana Roo, Mexico, have been implemented by the University of Rhode Island, Coastal Resources Center (CRC) and local partners to provide both tangible examples of participatory management and to build capacity for promoting integrated coastal management (ICM) as a tool for sustainable use and conservation of coastal resources. In 1998, Chetumal was chosen as a place to build the capacity of local institutions in various aspects of ICM. Here biodiversity was high, pressures from tourism were increasing, zoning plans were being developed, and additional marine protected areas were being designated, including the state Manatee Sanctuary in Chetumal Bay. No doubt this was additionally catalyzed by the 1998 declaration of the Meso American Reef Initiative and the subsequent program design by the Global Environment Facility aimed at conserving the world's second longest barrier reef, extending from Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula to the Bay Islands in Honduras. The USAID project supported the establishment of the *Red MIRC*, an ICM network of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and institutions. The network was to exchange experience, knowledge, understanding, and information on coastal issues between a broad group of stakeholders. In parallel, these organizations helped form the Belize-Mexico Alliance for Management of Common Coastal Resources (BEMAMCCOR), a bi-national effort to advance ICM in shared waters such as Chetumal Bay and the Meso American Reef complex. At the institution level, the University of Quintana Roo initiated efforts to create the MIRC Center to focus on research, extension, outreach, and academic programs associated with ICM. To date, partners and colleagues have implemented community extension, outreach, environmental education, and community-based tourism initiatives to stimulate interest and advance participatory democracy for coastal management in the region.

Understanding the need to integrate across issues, stakeholders, and levels of government, the 2001 objective for the USAID/CRC project was to "consolidate information, define issues, build stakeholder and decisionmaker support and capacity sufficient to identify priority actions and contribute to an inte-

grated management initiative in Chetumal Bay." One of the key goals was to have a well-attended meeting (later called the Chetumal Bay Summit) of key stakeholders to discuss the state-of-the-bay and to develop a consensus-driven action agenda. In addition to catalyzing ICM in Chetumal Bay, this would support the continued effort of the university to establish itself as a facilitator and to strengthen its capability and stature as an ICM center.

While the direct partners have been the NGO community and the university, there is the need to target ICM activities that include government actors. This coincides with one of the USAID/Mexico Democracy Program's goal and has been implemented by the International City/Country Managers Association (ICMA). This project contributes to institutional strengthening, particularly in areas where municipalities are major actors in resource management. The municipality of Chetumal in Quintana Roo was chosen by the ICMA to test their strategy for replicating their Resource Cities Program (RCP), which had been effective in Guadalajara. The RCP is a unique mechanism that provides technical assistance focusing on general municipal management, urban services management, and citizen participation. The RCP links cities in the US with municipalities in Mexico in an effort to facilitate know-how and practical experiences to municipalities in Mexico. At the same time, US cities benefit from these relationships.

In July 2000, a pilot project was designed to link Chetumal with a counterpart in the US through the ICMA. Sarasota, Florida, was chosen as the US community. The intent was for the Sarasota program's staff to assist the administrators in Chetumal to improve the operation of their water quality management systems, including potable, wastewater and storm drainage systems—all affecting the water quality in Chetumal Bay.

Sarasota, Florida was chosen for a variety of reasons. While Sarasota is much more developed and wealthier than Chetumal, parts of its local environment are more degraded. This can provide examples of good and bad development strategies, as well as the management techniques used to promote community participation, political commitment, impact mitigation, and habitat restoration.

Sarasota Bay and its watershed has been an established National Estuary Program of the US Environmental Protection Agency since 1989. The program has made significant advances in techniques that address the bay's conservation and management. Some of these techniques can be adapted for use in Chetumal, which experiences similar problems. In both places there is the need to preserve manatees, wetlands, and seagrass.

In September 2000, five people from Sarasota visited

Chetumal—four water quality specialists and the director of the bay program. The team identified the issues and priorities in Chetumal and used these to develop a follow-up assistance program. In December 2000, Chetumal's mayor and director of urban development and ecology visited Sarasota to participate in both political and technical forums regarding water and bay management. In April 2001, three technical staff from the water commission in Chetumal visited Sarasota to examine management techniques and physical infrastructure. In August 2001, a member of the Sarasota County team participated in the Chetumal Bay Summit.

The final trip to Sarasota will include the director of Chetumal's manatee sanctuary, a university staff member from the ICM center, and a community business leader, who will learn about the economic benefits of a well-managed bay. This trip will evaluate advances in bay and urban water management issues and identify the next steps towards enhanced local governance of Chetumal Bay. By the end of the project, 16 people with discrete roles and experience will have participated in events within the six exchange activities between Sarasota and Chetumal.

While there are still two visits ahead, there are several successes that can be shared to date:

- The Chetumal Bay Summit was convened in August 2001, with over 50 presentations and work sessions devoted to ecology, water quality, legal frameworks, socioeconomic issues, and binational agreements. Two key outcomes included input to a status-and-trends report and a permanent working group to forward scientific research and management efforts.

- The advanced technical capacity of the Chetumal Water Commission was verified. Many of their techniques for water treatment were state-of-the-art; however, it was revealed that the human component was missing in effective program implementation, such as fee structure and collection. It became very evident that water management was not only a technical issue, but rather a social, cultural, and political issue. Recent changes in Chetumal have resulted from the Water Commission's stronger stance on fee collection and their ability to recuperate costs for further improvements.

- Officials acknowledged that one key problem is the lack of community understanding on the links between septic systems and contamination of the bay, and sewer hookups. The water

commission has since begun to work with NGOs to initiate a public education campaign.

- The university has been recognized as a facilitator for open discussions. The actors understand that the common goal is to identify actions needed to avoid further degradation of the bay. The ICM network and the NGOs have focused their efforts on community outreach and environmental education. In parallel, the state has established a Manatee Sanctuary Committee, where municipality, NGOs, university, and other stakeholders are involved as "advisors" in its management.

- This exchange between Chetumal and Sarasota has shown the university, NGOs, and government participants in Chetumal that management is a long-term process that goes beyond the term limits of any one public official. Additionally, it has demonstrated that governance mechanisms can be adapted and implemented to become an effective tool for regional management.

## Sustainability of this Impact

While long-term programmatic linkages have not been confirmed, it is anticipated that the expertise and collaboration initiated by the pilot project will help to prioritize and direct future efforts in bay management. This will ensure that ecological, governance, and socioeconomic issues are addressed in future management initiatives.

It is also hoped that a mechanism can be identified to stimulate advances in local governance and participatory democracy, thereby increasing the success and sustainability of integrated management in Chetumal Bay as has happened in Sarasota Bay.

*For further information on the Democracy-Environment Initiatives, please refer to the Biodiversity Support Program's EDGE program at [www.bsp-online.org](http://www.bsp-online.org). For more information on the programs supported by the International City/County Management Association, please contact Octavio E. Chavez. E-mail: [ochavez@icma.org](mailto:ochavez@icma.org) or website [www.icma.org](http://www.icma.org).*

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*Results of the Chetumal Bay summit can be viewed at [www.mirc.uqroo.mx](http://www.mirc.uqroo.mx) or by contacting Rafael Romero. E-mail: [rafomer@correo.uqroo.mx](mailto:rafomer@correo.uqroo.mx)*