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# Story Behind Story: Sustainable Marina Development in the Gulf of California. Coastal Resources Center

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# Big Dreams for Baja



Boaters enjoying solitude in Mexico's Sea of Cortez. Inset: A marina under construction in the Baja village of Santa Rosalita.

## Plans for Mexican Peninsula Include Hotels and Marinas; One Problem: Getting There

By JOEL MILLMAN  
And JIM CARLTON

**A** Santa Rosalita, Mexico NEW BILLBOARD, erected by Mexico's state tourism agency here, touts the millions of pesos on their way to this spot on the Baja Peninsula 400 miles south of the U.S.-Mexico border. The money will promote resort development as part of a project, the government promises, that will have "over 100,000 beneficiaries."

### PROPERTY REPORT

A single spray-painted word asks, "Quién?" That cheeky graffiti—"Who?" in English—poses a \$100 million question that could nag planners of Mexico's Escalera Náutica for years to come. The "Nautical Route"—a chain of 22 government-franchised ports and marinas to be built or expanded along 2,500 miles of shoreline in north-



western Mexico—represents the country's most ambitious new tourism development since the spectacular success, more than a generation ago, of Cancun. Now ranking among among the Caribbean's busiest destinations, Cancun would be hard to duplicate anywhere, much less along the craggy, desolate Baja coast. Nonetheless, Mexican officials say the Escalera Náutica will be successful as well as ecologically safe. Best of all, they say, the estimated \$1.9 billion cost to build it around the Sea of Cortez can be financed largely by pri-

ate developers. But can it? Luring the vacation dollars of millions of rich gringos from the U.S. Southwest has been the dream of Mexican tourism officials for years, since the 1973 completion of a two-lane highway running the length of Baja's rugged spine. First by car, then by recreational vehicle, now by yacht, tourism projects here have always been launched under the same mantra: "Build it, and They Will Come."

Yet for 30 years—starting with a chain of government-owned motels, then a chain of recreational-vehicle courts—those schemes have failed as developers have been unable to overcome Baja's biggest obstacle of relative inaccessibility. Now, a new report from a respected U.S. research firm throws some cold water on the planning behind this latest Baja venture.

According to the study by San Francisco-based EDAW Inc., which was commissioned by the philanthropic David and Lucile Packard Foundation on behalf of some environmental and business groups in the region, demand for the kind of nautical tourism envisioned in Escalera Náutica is overblown by as much as 90%.

For example, Mexican officials say the project will attract more than 60,000 big boats. Please Turn to Page B6, Column 1

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annually from the U.S. by 2014—although only around 3,000 such vessels travel there today; the EDAW report concludes demand will support only about 10,000 annual boat visits in the Baja area over that time. The reason: Boating in the U.S. Southwest has largely stagnated. With so many aging baby boomers already having taken up the pastime, EDAW researchers foresee little reason for greater numbers to attempt sailing to Baja—a voyage that entails rough seas and treacherous currents and can last for weeks.

Mexican officials defend their projections, saying they take into account other variables such as overflow from California's filled-to-capacity marinas. "Anyway, the weather is better here; maybe you could have your boats six months in Mexico, six months in the U.S.," says Alejandro Rodríguez Mireles, an official of the agency Fonatur supervising the Escalera Náutica project.

Given that Baja's main attractions are its unspoiled and unpopulated deserts and beaches, environmentalists hope they can talk the government into pursuing a radically scaled-down version of the project that would take advantage of these assets—without undermining them. They worry that construction of marinas and other infrastructure would despoil a largely pristine landscape and threaten rare creatures like sea turtles.

"We support development in this region, but if we build infrastructure that is not needed, the damage will have been done," says Lorraine Rosenzweig, chief executive officer of the Mexican Nature Conservation Fund, which has scheduled a Jan. 22 meeting in Mexico City to review findings of the EDAW report with government officials.

Santa Rosalita was chosen for the first step in Mexico's ambitious plan. A windswept village midway down the peninsula, its first streetlights came just this past year—four solar-operated lamps erected between a public basketball court and a row of outhouses.

Yet the spot was selected as the western terminus of one of Escalera Náutica's most dubious presumptions, also called Asphalt Canal that would allow U.S. boat owners to save a week's sailing time around the tip of Baja by trucking their vessels overhead to the other coast.

The problem: Although Santa Rosalita lies at Baja's thinnest point, it has neither a hospitable harbor, nor adequate road access linking it to the Cortez shore. The EDAW report concluded that the "canal" makes little economic sense, given that most boats would likely press on to Cabo San Lucas, at most three days south.

# THE PROPERTY REPORT

## Grand Dreams for Mexico's Baja Peninsula



Whales such as this one abound in the waters off Mexico's Baja Peninsula.

"This project is a great PowerPoint presentation, but to build a marina here makes no sense either environmentally or economically," says Serge Dedina of the WildCoast international conservation team in San Diego, which monitors the health of the Baja coastline.

Pointing to the power shovels dredging fine silt from the half-emptied new marina, Mr. Dedina says constant beach erosion means the marina's operator will have to pay for continual upkeep—this, in a "port" that today lacks electricity and telephone service, to say nothing of food, lodging, medical facilities or fuel storage.

"Yachts? We see maybe one a month," says Sixto Alvarez of the Rafael Ortega Cruz fishing cooperative, sitting amid a collection of rotting skulls behind the cooperative's decrepit ice house. The packing shed is abandoned, he explains, because all the albatross here have been fished out.

Hard to reach by road, Santa Rosalita is almost equally inaccessible by sea. This part of the coast has along a stretch that yachters call the Baja Bash, where high winds and dangerous currents make sea travel south to San Diego arduous, if not impossible. A transit marina, in other words, would count

mainly on traffic going in one direction—and require the concessionaire running a transport service to pass on to boat owners his cost of bringing empty trucks back after a trip.

"As a delivery skipper, I'm not the least bit worried about losing business," says Craig Kimball, a yacht hauler who charges up to \$2,000 to bring vessels around Cabo San Lucas and into the Sea of Cortez from the West Coast. Operators using the Asphalt Canal might be able to charge an owner as little as \$1,000, Mr. Kimball calculates, but then the owner would still have to pay to get himself and his guests over to the other side, with additional expenses for their food and lodging. "The whole idea is to have fun on the water—not to save time," Mr. Kimball says.

Nonetheless, Fonatur officials say Mexico is committed to spending up to \$70 million for the transpeninsula highway and \$15 million apiece for new marinas on either coast—just for this link in the Escalera Náutica project. It's the linchpin that will lure other developers to the Sea of Cortez, starting at Puerto Escondido, where Fonatur says it has commitments from golfer Greg Norman to design two golf courses for a new development with Boston venture-capital group Advent International; plans for the \$200 million resort call for a 1,400-room hotel and state-of-the-art marina.

"To say we've committed is premature," says Diego Serchinsky, Advent's representative in Mexico City. "We are only at the study stage. We've promised to study this idea, but so far that's it."

### Escalera Náutica del Mar de Cortés: Reorientación hacia la Sustentabilidad

#### Resumen Ejecutivo



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### NORTHWEST MEXICO MARINA MARKET ANALYSIS



Prepared for  
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December 20, 2002

The consensus statement on an alternative development approach

project was approved, and Packard also decided to undertake an independent analysis of the main justification set out by the national tourism agency FONATUR, which focused on the market for marina slips and recreational harbors. The firm EDAW was hired to carry out the work.

#### Actions underway

CRC selected La Paz Bay, in Baja California Sur, as a good place to start work in the fall of 2002, in view of the ongoing preparation of ecological ordinance for the bay, and marina expansion and development projects already underway. A working group of authorities, marina operators and civic associations including ISLA, which facilitates the process, began meeting to survey the extent of use of good practices in existing marinas and to develop policies and practices specific to this popular tourist area which is becoming a gateway to the mid-Gulf's spectacular islands. The working group decided to intervene in the review of early proposals for a national regulation on marina development, hoping that good marina practices developed for La Paz could contribute to regional and national decision making.

#### The Alternative Proposal for a Sustainable Marina Development Project

At about the same time a small group of organizations began meeting in La Paz to assist in the review of the Marina Market study being prepared by EDAW. CRC was included in this group. Two products were generated as a result: the technical study and a consensus statement completed in December, 2002, recommending an approach to identifying a more appropriately scaled and staged recreational boating and marina program. Nine groups are listed as authors, including CRC.

Both the study and the statement were presented to the public in Mexico City on January 22 and have received wide press coverage, including an initial skeptical response from the leadership of FONATUR. Pam Rubinoff was asked to prepare a presentation on good marina practices by the chair of the group, Lorenzo Rosensweig, the director of the Mexican Fund for Nature

#### Next Steps

CRC's project on Recreational Marinas in the Gulf of California will involve three key activities:

#### 1. Adapting International Guidelines for use in the Gulf of California

The project team will continue to support the group that is accompanying the *Escalera Nautica* project, and providing substantive input

to SEMARNAT, FONATUR and their consultants. In this way, good management practices (GMPs) can be used to enhance existing practices in existing marinas and provide criteria for building and operating new marinas.

As the Environmental Master Planning process unfolds in the states around the Gulf, every effort needs to be made to conduct a consultative and expert process to make basic siting decisions. The project team will model good communication behavior in making timely information available about its activities, as well as:

Provide recommendations on decision making criteria for marina siting and development that are used in an open and transparent manner

Contribute information to forums about the *Escalera Nautica* project.

Work with the marina industry to improve its internal communication and its ability to link and influence the larger development process.

#### 2. Training and outreach

Once the guidelines are prepared work will be initiated with the *Asociación Mexicana de Marinas Turísticas (AMMT)* to conduct an assessment of training requirements and approaches.

#### 3. Application in sites and facilities

Follow-up visits and technical assistance will be provided for selected individual marinas to assist in the application of GMPs within their facilities or planned projects. Harbor - based demonstrations of good management will focus on working with inter-institutional groups to implement selected aspects of GMPs through planning, siting, implementation of local ordinance and voluntary compliance by industry. GMPs will be tested which address socio-economic benefits to the community. Support baseline socio-economic analysis in La Paz and Bahia Santa Maria, as a means to identify the use, access, and control of existing natural resources. In this manner, the expansion programs for marina and mariculture sectors can begin to promote equity of use, by private sector and social sector, men and women, local and international developers.

We expect this process to continue to be dynamic over the two years of the program, as well as a contribution to the larger regional effort to develop a vision and goals statement for the Gulf as a whole through the active leadership of the business community.

# Conservation of Critical Coastal Ecosystems in Mexico:

The story behind the story: Guiding Marina Development in the Gulf of California



#### A Story Behind the Story

##### A focusing event

In February 2001 the Mexican Government announced the *Escalera Nautica* or Nautical Ladder, a bold project to develop tourism by constructing and expanding marinas around the Gulf of California. This was accompanied by the signing of an agreement by the governors of the five coastal states, promises of coordination by federal authorities from environ-



Escalera Nautica Proposal

mental and development agencies and expressions of support by local authorities and interests. Our partner in the region, Conservation International-Mexico, informed us of the launching of the program and ask

Few details of the project were known, but a copy of the agreement quickly found its way into circulation among the community of researchers and conservation organizations in the Gulf region. The *Escalera Nautica* became a key issue at the May, 2001 Gulf-wide workshop on conservation priorities, held in the resort city of Mazatlan. The event brought together more than 150 members of the community to identify the most important sites and resources for maintaining biodiversity, and assessing the trends, threats and conflicts which need to be taken into account in setting priorities for research and action. Mexican officials responsible for the tourism project were present and a closing segment of the five day workshop was devoted to discussion of the character of the project and key concerns. A group reviewed the preliminary list of sites proposed for development during the meeting and distributed a statement of concern which was signed by a number of people in the workshop.

Little was known about the marina industry in the Gulf region, or about the potential impacts and best ways to manage siting, construction and operation. During the Mazatlan meeting, Don Robadue at CRC compiled a Compact Disc with examples of the broad array of studies,



guidelines and best practices from the successful U.S. experience. This was distributed to a core group working to formulate an organized response, drawing upon existing coalitions, regional conservation organizations and donors.

#### Reviewing the existing situation

Pam Rubinoff, leader of CRC's Mexico project, formed a team to review the existing situation with



recreational harbors and marinas in the Gulf with funding from the current USAID Mexico project. Neil Ross and Mark Amaral, both pioneers in the U.S. on clean marinas and harbor management assisted in reviewing sites, interviewing marina owners and operators. Their report suggested a set of short term actions toward developing an industry code of conduct, building on the relatively good situation in many existing facilities, demonstrate a Clean Marina approach in an existing harbor, as well as contribute to marina development policies for the region.

This report was widely distributed and presented to a regional alliance of coastal non-government organizations, ALCOSTA, in early 2002. Officials promised to prepare regional and site specific impact assessments



as well as address marina development in the Gulf of California Environmental Master Plan that was underway. Meanwhile, efforts to develop more specific designs and to initiate some of the planned physical developments in the Nautical Ladder project proceeded. These controversial efforts are described in the Wall Street Journal article.

#### The Packard proposal

The Packard Foundation was already expecting a follow-up proposal for CRC-initiated work in good aquaculture practices in Sinaloa State. CRC presented a proposal in March, 2002 which combined work with both marinas and mariculture. The \$413,000

For information on USAID's Conservation of Critical Coastal Ecosystems in Mexico program, contact Pam Rubinoff or Don Robadue at Coastal Resources Center, University of Rhode Island at Ph: 401.874.6224; Fx: 401.789.4670 Email: rubi@gso.uri.edu, robadue@gso.uri.edu <http://www.crc.uri.edu/field/lac/mexico/>

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