

The following message asks you to write to Colombian Government national authorities, seeking their support for efforts to protect the marine and coastal biodiversity of the Archipelago of San Andrés, Old Providence, and Santa Catalina which is Colombia's only oceanic and West Indian Department (State).

CORALINA SEEKS SUPPORT FOR MARINE
BIODIVERSITY IN SAN ANDRÉS

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The area is biologically very important, but degrading rapidly. The regional environmental protection agency, CORALINA, seeks Caribbean and global pressure on the Colombian government to accede to protection proposals and assistance projects which are currently being held up by the national government. For example, the national government is holding up routine approvals for GEF planning (PDF) grant applications:

Reasons for this holdup by the national government are complex and multifaceted, including:

- the failure of continental authorities to respond to small island needs (something we all can understand);

- the ethnic and cultural isolation of the indigenous (West Indian) culture from the mainstream Hispanic culture of the national government;
- the inability of national government officials to adjust to the new autonomous stature of the regional environmental corporations, such as CORALINA.

We hope that firm but polite letters of support for the establishment of a series of marine biodiversity protection schemes in the Archipelago of San Andrés, Old Providence, and Santa Catalina by CORALINA will help to break loose some of these impediments.

A CALL FOR HELP FROM THE WESTERN CARIBBEAN

A little known and little studied area of the western Caribbean is rich in tropical marine biodiversity. This area is the Archipelago of San Andrés, Old Providence, and Santa Catalina which is Colombia's only oceanic and West Indian department.

The Archipelago has an insular area of 57 km² including the 3 inhabited islands. The marine area covers approximately 350,000 km² with one of the most extensive and productive reef systems in the Atlantic, including 2 barrier reefs, 5 large atolls, and several less well defined coral banks, extending for a total length of over 500 km on the Lower Nicaraguan rise. The reef formations are particularly complex as a result of the open oceanic location and resulting heavy wave action and turbulence to which they have adapted. Many species of fire coral, lace coral, black coral, organ pipe coral, and stony coral as well as sea fans and soft corals are found throughout the Archipelago.

The Southern Marine Area is made up of 2 atolls. South-Southwest Cays are a nearly circular atoll with a diameter of over 8 km and a windward peripheral reef that extends for about 6 km. Courtown Cays (also known as East-Southeast Cays) are a kidney-shaped atoll a little more than 13 km in diameter with reefs to the NE, E, and SE sides. Heavy wave turbulence, swift currents, and an intricate system of caves have created a unique and bizarre reef environment. The Northern Marine Area includes 3 atoll areas. Quitasueco Bank (locally known as Queena) is the largest atoll structure in the region, as it is over 60 km long and from 10 to 20 km wide with a windward reef wall extending more than 40 km. Serrana Bank is an extensive reef complex about 36 km long and 15 km wide including the insular shelf. Roncador Bank is an elongated atoll, approximately 15 km by 7 km. The peripheral reef is virtually continuous on the windward side and extends for 12 km. These cays and banks are some of the most beautiful places

in the world!

The well-developed reef systems enclose extensive lagoons rich in seagrass beds. The coastal areas of the 3 larger islands have the mangrove swamps necessary to complete highly intact reef ecosystems. 167 species of fish belonging to 54 families typical of ichthyofaunal tropical reef ecosystems have been identified in the Archipelago. There are several endemic fish species, of which *Gambusia aestiputeus* and *Poecilia vetiprovidentiae* are included in the IUCN Red List. Commercially threatened species – queen conch, spiny lobster, spotted spiny lobster, and the giant grouper or jewfish – are found throughout the coastal waters and banks of the region.

Species of sea turtles that feed and nest throughout the Archipelago include hawksbill, green, loggerhead, and leatherback. The species most commonly found is the loggerhead, followed by the hawksbill. However, in recent years, the number of all species is declining dramatically. Beaches throughout the region, most particularly in the outlying cays, offer optimal sites for marine turtle reproduction and the extensive seagrass beds are important feeding areas. Migrant bird species such as falcons, ospreys, herons and egrets frequent the marine region and colonies of birds nest there. There is a sizable booby colony.

These areas are the traditional fishing grounds of the artisanal fishermen of the Archipelago who have been fishing this region since the colony of Providence Island was founded by England in 1623. The native islander people of the Archipelago are of English-African descent and have a history, culture, Protestant religious tradition, and Creole English language consistent with that of the other West Indian islands that were originally settled by the British. Native islanders were granted the status of a legally-recognized ethnic minority group within Colombia by the National Constitution of 1991, at last giving them the right to use English as an official language, worship at Baptist and Adventist churches, present petitions to the authorities, vote for their own governor and mayor, and all the other civil rights that were accorded the Catholic/Latin majority. Prior to that time, the discrimination against islanders culturally and racially was severe.

However, their access to their traditional fisheries has become WORSE in the recent past rather than better. A Congressional law passed in 1993 called for:

- 1) the establishment of a Departmental Fishing Board that would issue fishing permits and licenses within the Archipelago,
- 2) representation by native islanders on the Departmental Fishing Board, and

- 3) establishment of special marine and coastal areas for the use of the artisanal fishermen.

This board has yet to function.

Fishing licenses are issued by the National Institute of Fishing and Aquaculture (INPA) in Bogota, and the fees for all permits and licenses are collected on the mainland. It would appear that there are NO CONTROLS on the issuing of these permits, and abuses are rampant. Nor are there any regulations that protect habitat, limit size, restrict the amount of catch or by-catch, or define closed seasons.

The commercial vessels which ply these banks have almost no controls. They carry as many as a hundred crew from places like Jamaica, Dominican Republic, the mainland coast of Colombia, and Honduras who fish without restriction. Many of these boats are of foreign registry, and the majority fish for weeks or months and land no product in the Archipelago. Indeed, so little fish is available much of the time in San Andrés that it is difficult for the native people to buy the fish, conch, and lobster that make up their traditional diet. The use of fishing methods such as drift nets, set nets, and drag nets is prohibited throughout the region as well as the use of compressors when diving, but these laws are only obeyed by native fishermen. Nonetheless, local fishermen report that they are frequently harassed by Colombian military authorities while the commercial vessels are left alone. The complexities of the situation are further aggravated by the problem of drug trafficking through the region.

When fishing the cays, banks, and outlying waters, native fishermen report that the multi-national boats take anything they can catch or gather, including using turtles as shark bait, harvesting booby eggs, killing quantities of by-catch, and cleaning out conch and lobster beds regardless of size or spawn. Local people report that conch sold are frequently so immature that 15 are required to make up one pound. A few weeks ago divers from a single vessel took more than 30,000 lbs. of queen conch in 2 days; a not unusual occurrence according to local fishermen. They also use long-lines and throw anchors without consideration of destruction to the reef or sea bottom. Given the shallowness of the banks – in particular at Quitasueco – vessels frequently run aground, causing extensive habitat damage. The fishermen also report that fishing vessels that have caught their limit (i.e., according to the amount their boat can carry, since there are no legal limits) pass their permits to vessels waiting outside the banks who then fish using the same permit. In this way, a single permit will be used by as many as 3 or 4 vessels.

The Colombian national environment system

(SINA) has set up a system of decentralized Regional Autonomous Corporations (CARs) to manage renewable resources and the environment throughout the nation. The CAR for the Archipelago - The Corporation for the Sustainable Development of the Archipelago of San Andrés, Old Providence, and Santa Catalina, CORALINA – has developed a project with the support of the artisanal fishing cooperatives to set up a regional marine reserve system which includes 4 separate MPAs : San Andrés barrier reef and coastal waters, Old Providence and Santa Catalina barrier reef and coastal waters, southern archipelago off-shore cays and marine area, and northern archipelago off-shore banks and marine area. The project includes demarcation of management areas such as no-entry and no-take zones (ecological reserves, research areas), limited use zones (dive and snorkel sites, monitoring areas), and buffer zones. An unusual component of the MPA project as designed by CORALINA is the delimitation – with active participation of the native fishermen – of sizable traditional use zones to protect the rights of the artisanal fishermen and restore their fisheries. The management plans for the MPAs would utilize a variety of strategies to strive for restoration and maximum sustainable use of the region's fisheries.

CORALINA, in technical partnership with Island Resources Foundation, has applied for a GEF grant with the World Bank as implementing agency. Additionally, the Center for Marine Conservation has expressed their interest in working with CORALINA on marine conservation projects for the region. CORALINA is working hard to develop and implement strategies of sustainable fisheries management and marine conservation for the area of their jurisdiction. However, in order to make further progress towards this goal, they need the approval of the Colombian national government. Colombia has ratified relevant international instruments including the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD), the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and the Cartagena Convention. The action plan of the Jakarta Mandate – in which the program for implementing the Convention on Biodiversity with respect to coastal and marine biodiversity is outlined - calls for the development of protected areas, sustainable fisheries management, and recognition and protection of traditional sea tenure.

To implement the directives of the CBD and the Jakarta Mandate, the IUCN Global Marine Initiative promotes the establishment of a global system of representative marine protected areas. The IUCN has divided the world's oceanic area into 18 representative marine regions of which the wider Caribbean is region #7. Although the Eastern Caribbean has a number of MPAs, there is a serious lack of marine protected areas in the Western Caribbean. With the exception of a handful of coastal and estuarine reserve areas along the Atlantic coast of Central America, there are no MPAs in this section of the Caribbean.

Subscribers to this list can help CORALINA and the native people of the Archipelago in their mission to recover and protect the biodiversity of their territorial waters by writing or sending a fax to both the Ministry of the Environment and the National Department of Planning urging them to support CORALINA in the establishment of the marine reserve system and demanding that they take immediate action to stop the unregulated over-exploitation of the fisheries of the outlying cays and banks in the northern and southern regions of the Archipelago.

These letters should be sent to:

Dr. Juan Mayr
Minister of the Environment
Calle 37, No. 8-40
Bogota, Colombia
fax : your international access code + 57-1-288-9892

Dr. Jaime Ruiz, Director
National Planning Department
Calle 26, No. 13-19
Bogota, Colombia
fax : your international access code + 57-1-281-3348

Please send e-mail copies of your messages to Island Resources Foundation <bpotter@irf.org> and CORALINA <coralin2@coll.telecom.com.co> Island Resources Foundation is actively supporting CORALINA's efforts---we are not disinterested in the outcome – please help.... Bruce Potter