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SEAWATCH

By Lucia Corral & Tamara Double

DEDICATED TO A HEALTHY SEA OF CORTEZ

The Sea of Cortez in Mexico was once famously named “the world’s aquarium” by Jacques Cousteau due to its seemingly endless bounty of marine life, thriving reefs and rich biodiversity. It was a mecca for divers and sports fishermen from all over the world and brought wealth through tourism to the coastal communities of Baja California. But, over the last 40 years, with the increase in commercial fishing and the use of unsustainable and illegal

fishing methods, the reefs and dependent fish populations of the Sea of Cortez have declined at an alarming rate.

In La Paz, the capital city of Southern Baja California, a group of people concerned with this rapid decline in fish stocks in the Sea of Cortez formed the non-profit organization, **SeaWatch** in 1993.



Spearheaded by founder Mike McGettigan, one of the organization's early conservation successes was helping to secure protection for the Giant Pacific manta ray in the Revillagigedo Islands, 240 miles south of the Baja Peninsula, where the shark fishermen were slaughtering the mantas. With public pressure, the Mexican government decreed the islands a national biosphere in 1994, affording the mantas and other sea life permanent protection and creating a 10 million dollar a year ecotourism industry taking divers there to see the Giant Pacific mantas.

McGettigan also set in motion the acquisition of two confiscated and abandoned Chinese fishing vessels, with the idea to create artificial reefs in the shallow waters of **Espiritu Santo National Park**. With help from the Mexican Navy, the ships were cleaned and sunk in the waters of the Espiritu Santo National Park, where today, 20 years later, they flourish as living reefs, enjoyed by thousands of divers a year.

In 2009, SeaWatch petitioned and secured federal regulations that prohibit any fish extraction while diving with compressed air. This outlawed the **unsustainable methods of fishing** that were removing 20 tons of reef fish nightly from the reefs around Espiritu Santo National Park and in the Bay of La Paz.

Despite the new law, this illegal and ecologically destructive, but economically lucrative, form of fishing continued unabated in the Espiritu Santo National Park. In response, SeaWatch and local stakeholders initiated a citizen-driven vigilance campaign to put a stop to the illegal fishing.

The campaign morphed into a non-profit organization called **Red de Observatorio Ciudadano** (ROC) that now monitors the waters around the park in patrol boats, captained by former illegal fishermen. It

has experienced great success, receiving national recognition from the Mexican government.

In 2017, ROC's patrol boats assisted federal fisheries authorities in the confiscation of 13 illegal fishing boats. And since April of 2018 there have been no boats found illegally fishing in Espiritu Santo National Park. As expected, fish populations have made a welcome comeback, especially the heavily targeted parrotfish.

While continuing to fund ROC, in 2016 SeaWatch initiated and continues to fund a local and very effective public communication campaign, "**Espiritu Santo es parte de ti**" (Espiritu Santo is part of you), working to raise public awareness and advocacy, promote community pride and good practices and eradicate illegal fishing in the park, with a focus on eliminating the market for parrotfish, a reef grazing species that is critical to the maintenance of healthy reefs.

Since it is not illegal to buy, sell or consume parrotfish in Mexico, the campaign is focused on educating and persuading the major **supermarkets** and local **restaurants** to stop selling or serving parrotfish. Vibrant reefs cannot survive without grazers like parrotfish, and without healthy reefs, the ecological health of Espiritu Santo cannot recover. This has been a very successful strategy with all 4 major supermarkets, including Walmart, and more than 50 restaurants in La Paz making the commitment to not sell or serve parrotfish.

Currently, the campaign is helping fund the work being done to gain "protected status" for all parrotfish species in the Sea of Cortez. In 2018, Espiritu Santo National Park was recognized by the **IUCN** as one of the best managed protected areas of the world – the first ever recognition of this kind in Mexico, and only the second in all Latin America.

Also in 2018, ROC won recognition by the Mexican Federal Government as one of the most important environmental organizations for nature conservation in marine protected areas. The Mexican Senate also recognized ROC as a model non-profit conservation organization.

But most important of all, local citizens and user groups are now engaged and actively involved in protecting Espiritu Santo National Park. Whale sharks arrive in ever greater numbers in the Bay of La Paz, along with thousands of **Mobulays** and the orcas that feed on them. In 2018 Giant Pacific mantas returned after an absence of 15 years and hundreds of juvenile schooling hammerhead sharks were seen at the El Bajo seamount for the first time in over 20 years. Importantly, large schools of juvenile parrotfish and other reef fish species have returned to the **reefs of Espiritu Santo**. Such recoveries are interconnected and are proof that our collective community efforts make a difference. But with so much more to do, SeaWatch continues on its mission to work collaboratively for a healthy Sea of Cortez. ■

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