

OCEAN FACTS



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Cabo Pulmo: Protecting Baja California's Thriving Coral Reef from Massive Tourism Development

Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park, at the southern tip of Mexico's Baja California peninsula, is home to the only living hard coral reef in the Gulf of California. Teeming with marine life, it is one of the healthiest marine reserves in the world. But Spanish developer Hansa Urbana plans to build a colossal tourism and real estate complex right next door, which would devastate the park's fragile ecosystem. To protect the reef and its marine life, NRDC is partnering with local and international groups in a multi-faceted campaign to stop Hansa Urbana and create a sustainable, long-term development plan for the area.

ONE OF THE MOST ROBUST MARINE RESERVES IN THE WORLD

The preservation to date of Cabo Pulmo has been a local, national, and international success story, one that has become a strong model for other international conservation efforts. Decades of intense overfishing in the 1970s–80s nearly depleted Cabo Pulmo's marine life. To save this natural treasure, the local community successfully petitioned the government to help protect the reef. Cabo Pulmo became a protected natural area in 1995 and a National Marine Park in 2000. The community also reoriented their local economy from fishing to ecotourism, and mandated that the entire park be declared a "no-take" zone, prohibiting all fishing within the park's limits.

Thanks to their initiative and ongoing efforts, Cabo Pulmo's marine life has rebounded beyond anyone's expectations. It is now a permanent and seasonal home to a stunning variety of species from both the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of California. The reef itself is comprised of 25 different species of coral, while humpback whales, grey whales, orcas, dolphins, sharks, marlins, manta rays, and 226 species of fish frequent its waters. Five of the world's seven endangered species of sea turtles find refuge there, and leatherback and olive ridley sea turtles nest on its beaches. A recent study by top Mexican and U.S. researchers found that the marine life in Cabo Pulmo National Park has increased 463 percent over the past ten years.¹



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TOURISM AND REAL ESTATE PLANS THREATEN CABO PULMO'S MARINE LIFE

Despite its tremendous value, Cabo Pulmo is now under serious threat. Spanish developer Hansa Urbana is proposing to build the Cabo Cortés resort nearby, a tourism and real estate complex comparable in size to Cancun. If completed, the project would consist of 15 large hotels with more than 30,000 hotel rooms, two 27-hole golf courses, a 490-slip marina, desalination and water treatment plants, a private jet strip and other infrastructure, all on the property adjacent to, and directly north of, Cabo Pulmo.

The influx of tourism and population growth around a project of this magnitude would inevitably result in damaging pollution and constant pressure on Cabo Pulmo's fragile marine and coastal ecosystems. The vulnerability of coral to human activity and pollution is well documented, and changes in water quality, temperature, salinity and turbidity will harm the now-thriving reef. Sand dredging during construction of the marina and breakwater, fertilizers and chemicals for golf courses, discharge from the desalination and water treatment plants, and pollution from boats—as well as increased human population—would take a grave toll on this crucial natural resource.



NRDC in the Baja Peninsula

NRDC has worked in Baja California since 1995, when we joined local groups fighting Mitsubishi's proposal for a massive salt works near Laguna San Ignacio, one of the last untouched gray whale nurseries. We spearheaded a five year campaign that ultimately succeeded in stopping the salt works. Since the project's cancellation in 2000, NRDC and our partners have worked to ensure permanent protection for the Lagoon and its surrounding lands. We have secured the highest level of protection for 346,850 acres of land and we are working to conserve an additional 150,000 acres.

In March 2005, NRDC launched our second campaign in Baja, to protect the last 100 to 200 vaquita marina porpoises—the world's smallest and most endangered marine mammal—from accidental entanglement in fish and shrimp nets in the Upper Gulf of California. We obtained unprecedented commitments from local fishermen and Ocean Garden, Inc., the largest U.S. importer of Mexican shrimp, to improve the sustainability of the fishery. NRDC then worked with Mexican partners and international scientists to develop new protections for the vaquita and to create economic alternatives for fishermen and trawlers. We continue to collaborate with our partners and local fishing communities through a community-based program to ensure the survival of the vaquita and an economic future for the Upper Gulf communities.



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PROTECTING THE REEF FROM OVER-DEVELOPMENT THREATS NOW AND INDEFINITELY

The local community is once again taking action to protect Cabo Pulmo's reef by working with regional, national, and international organizations. NRDC joined the effort in 2010, and together we have created a dynamic, multi-faceted campaign to stop Cabo Cortés. Through legal, communications, financial, and educational strategies, NRDC and our partners can halt this irresponsible and poorly-planned project.

Yet, stopping Hansa Urbana is not enough. Other proposals to build up the peninsula's entire East Cape region are waiting in the wings. To ensure long-term protection for Cabo Pulmo's coral reef, we must go even further. To this end, NRDC is assisting our partners in the creation of a long-term environmentally sustainable development plan for the East Cape, with input from local communities, to ensure they have a say in what type of projects would most benefit their economies and their lives. When completed, the plan will foster local economic growth while preserving the area's coast, coral reef and marine life indefinitely.

¹ Aburto-Oropeza O., Erisman B., Galland G.R., Mascareñas-Osorio I., Sala E., et al. (2011) "Large Recovery of Fish Biomass in a No-Take Marine Reserve;" PLoS ONE 6(8): e23601. Doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0023601.