



John Jones

Marinas Development Threatens Baja California Surf Breaks

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Baja California. To anyone who has ever traveled to the region, these two words evoke images of solitude and unbridled nature, qualities that lend the peninsula its unique beauty. With its sheltered coves, forsaken deserts, and rugged mountains, Baja California is one of the last truly wild places on the planet. The peninsula plays host to a range of ecosystems and myriad flora and fauna, included among these: destinations for migratory bird species, essential sea turtle habitats, and grey whale nurseries. The region is also home to a Natural World Heritage site and three internationally recognized biosphere reserves. To surfers, the peninsula exists as a destination that promises “discovery” and unforeseen adventures, all seemingly frozen in time. Yet all this remains in grave danger, threatened by the development of an Escalera Náutica, literally a nautical ladder, taking the form of 22 marinas, lining the precious coast of the Baja California peninsula.

The idea behind the project, championed by the Mexican tourism development agency FONATUR (National Fund for Tourism Promotion) and the current Fox administration, is to create a chain of marinas that provides North American yachters with the motivation to make the long journey south to Baja California and Baja California Sur. A slew of tourist development would accompany the marinas, including the planned construction of at least 12 new golf courses, the expansion of 20 existing airports/airstrips, and construction of new hotels and facilities, all to provide the massive influx of tourists with everything they could want or need. FONATUR predicts that annually, the Escalera Náutica will attract approximately 50,000 yachts carrying 1,000,000 visitors to the region (over 10 times the current number of annual visitors). This is the proposed idea. The likely reality paints an even bleaker picture, for those who inhabit as well as those who visit the region.

The Threats

To surfers, the reality of the Escalera Náutica promises the destruction of numerous point breaks through dredging and the construction of piers, breakwaters and marinas. Some of the at-risk breaks include Cabo Colonett, Punta Abreojos, Santa Rosaliita, Scorpion Bay (San Juanico), and Puerto Magdalena (San Carlos). The marina at Santa Rosaliita has already been constructed. As it continues to fill with sand, surfers can only watch and wait for the environmental impacts to unfold at this location. Surf rider Executive Director Chris Evans states of the project, “At a very bare minimum, this will kill the surf economy, priceless natural treasures and substantially contribute to the ‘death by 1000 cuts’ that the La Paz to Bering Sea Coasts are experiencing. There are few words that can describe the enormity of this looming environmental tragedy.” Luckily, there is still time for action to stop the wanton destruction of other breaks. But the negative impacts of the Escalera Náutica development clearly

reach beyond the inconvenience and loss of destination to traveling surfers. To the local communities, dependent upon each of their areas' natural resources for economic livelihood, the outcomes are potentially far more tragic. Unfortunately, the Mexican central government, situated geographically and figuratively far from the region, has failed to take the local communities and their needs and concerns into account. In Scorpion Bay, where the surf industry generates considerable income for the small fishing community, FONATUR has yet to consult residents and service providers regarding the marina they plan to build, which clearly threatens the surf breaks and surrounding tourist facilities.

The pattern of ignoring local needs and concerns is repeated at the vast majority of the proposed sites. In Bahía de los Angeles, an ecotourism hotspot, the construction of a marina threatens to drastically alter the economic and environmental landscape.

Local fisherman and residents have studied the natural flora and fauna surrounding the town to be able to supplement their incomes working as naturalists and guides. These guides take visitors to help save stranded sea turtles, swim with whale sharks, scuba dive in an underwater paradise, and visit secluded island hideouts by kayak, often accompanied by the massive blue whales that frequent the waters off town. To the dismay of many locals, FONATUR has yet to prepare an Environmental Impact Study (EIS) of the fragile ecosystem in Bahía de los Angeles, present a management plan for regulating visitor traffic throughout this 'protected' area, nor consult local service providers as to their needs and interests. While the Baja California peninsula clearly needs economic development, and tourism can provide a ready source of income, the Escalera Náutica unfortunately threatens to do more harm than good. As stated above, the Mexican government has yet to perform the necessary studies of environmental impacts to the proposed sites. Even more dangerous though, is the fact that it has not carried out market studies of North American yachters to find out if the demand for such a system of marinas even exists. Even the financing for the project remains in question. While promising to invest over US\$ 200 million, the Mexican government still needs to raise over US\$ 1.7 billion to complete the project. This gives rise to one of the greatest concerns, that the Escalera Náutica will end unfinished, another "white elephant," just like past FONATUR projects in Loreto and Puerto Escondido, leading to the loss and ruin of valuable natural resources with no benefit to local communities. Many of the plan's critics, asking whether there is demand for 8,000 new boat slips, the accompanying hotels and golf courses, fear that it simply provides an opportunity for intensive land speculation, in addition to money laundering opportunities for the drug trade. In a region so unique, with a multitude of natural resources, the opportunities for sustainable development abound. Don't let them go to waste.



It's too late for Santa Rosalita. Is Scorpion Bay next?

What Can You Do?

As one of the principal sources of tourism income, surfers can make a considerable impact on local economies throughout the Baja California peninsula. Make the journey to these sites while the surf breaks and surrounding natural areas still exist. While you are there, support local shops and services rather than bringing all your supplies from home.

Get involved! Visit www.propeninsula.org for updates on the Escalera Náutica and to join the letter writing campaign urging the Fox administration to halt current development plans and look for economically and environmentally responsible alternatives. Pro Peninsula, a San Diego based nonprofit organization dedicated to environmental preservation of Baja California, is working with the Surfrider Foundation, WILDCOAST, and a coalition of groups to stop the threats posed by the Escalera Náutica. Send letters to:

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