

## NGOs Enable Mexico to Purchase Islands for Conservation

In a transaction funded by an alliance of US and Mexican NGOs, the government of Mexico has acquired a 96-km<sup>2</sup> group of islands in the Gulf of California, setting a precedent for private support of national protection efforts in the country, according to government officials. The US \$3.3-million deal - led by the Mexican Foundation for Environmental Education (FUNDEA), The Nature Conservancy, and the World Wildlife Fund - will bring the biodiverse islands under federal protection.

Known locally as Isla Espiritu Santo, the largely uninhabited islands had faced the possibility of commercial development. Unlike most of the 900 islands in the Gulf of California, which are predominantly held by the federal government, Espiritu Santo was owned by a local community under earlier land-reform programs. Although all gulf islands are subject to various restrictions on development under Mexican law, the landowners of Espiritu Santo had built small-scale housing for tourists there in recent years and were reportedly entertaining offers to sell the land to Mexican or foreign developers.

Consisting of two main islands and several rocky islets, Espiritu Santo is home to three endemic mammal species. More than 50 species of marine birds and 15 species of marine mammals live in the surrounding waters. Human presence on the islands mainly consists of passing fishermen and day-tripping tourists (kayakers, scuba divers, and hikers) from the nearby city of La Paz.

The Mexican government's Commission on Natural Protected Areas (CONANP) will manage the islands under its marine protected areas program, although the new protected area lacks a marine component so far. CONANP officials are working to designate a marine park in the surrounding waters. "Over the next months, we'll conduct a series of public workshops to analyze the establishment of the marine park and define the uses to be allowed, regulations, and zoning," said Gabriela Anaya, CONANP's director of the new Espiritu Santo protected area. "We would like to have an MPA that includes some no-take zones within its boundaries."

### Privately funded endowment

"The future of conservation in Mexico is through public-private partnerships," said Ernesto Enkerlin, CONANP president. "In the case of Espiritu Santo, the nongovernmental sector bought the land and gave it back to all the people of Mexico."

In addition to receiving the islands, CONANP accepted a US \$1.5-million grant from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation to help fund an endowment for the long-term stewardship of the island. User fees charged to tourists to access Espiritu Santo, which CONANP started collecting last year, will also go toward the endowment. The agency seeks to establish endowments to provide up to 30% of funding for all of its protected areas nationwide. The Espiritu Santo endowment is CONANP's seventeenth to date.

### For more information

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