

Perspective | The MPAs of Central America: An introductory view of their successes, lessons learned, and ongoing challenges (first of three articles)

By **Carlos A. Espinosa**

Editor's note: The countries of Central America possess several decades of experience with coastal and marine protected areas. MPA News invited Carlos Espinosa, founder and director of [Dos Mares](#), to contribute insights on the past, present, and future of MPAs in Central America. Dos Mares promotes MPA sustainability in the region by disseminating marine science knowledge and conservation tools, and by fostering green business opportunities. Carlos is originally from Nicaragua, and worked for several international agencies in Central America, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and United States before founding Dos Mares. The following is the first of three articles by him.

The colors and warmth of the tropics make Central America unforgettable. These rich, vibrant coastal landscapes have inspired marine scientists, foreign visitors, and local inhabitants alike in their efforts to protect and conserve the most pristine marine zones throughout the region, on both the Pacific and Caribbean sides.

Beginning with Nicaragua in 1958, the Peninsula de Cosiguina (Pacific) was the first official protected coastal area in Central America. Neighboring countries soon followed suit: Costa Rica in 1963 with the creation of Cabo Blanco (Pacific); Guatemala in 1969 with National Park Sipacate – Naranjo (Pacific); Panama in 1976 with National Park Portobelo (Caribbean); Honduras in 1980 with Rio Platano (Caribbean); Belize in 1982 with Natural Halfmoon Caye (Caribbean), which was the first specified *marine* – not coastal – protected area in Central America; Honduras in 1993 with Cayos Cochinos (Caribbean); and most recently El Salvador in 2008 with Los Cobanos (Pacific).

Central America now possesses at least 197 different areas that directly protect vital ocean and coastal habitats. These areas are not necessarily all categorized as MPAs due to their different management categories. But a rough breakdown of protected areas per country has Belize with 86, Panama with 45, Costa Rica with 24, Honduras with 23, Nicaragua with 8, Guatemala with 7 and El Salvador with 4.

With a collection of anywhere from ten to sixty years of experiences since their respective formations and legal recognitions, what are the individual stories behind these protected areas? What successes have they celebrated? What challenges have they overcome? In a region subject to continuous political instability, socioeconomic changes, obscure economic interests and widespread poverty, what have been some of the most valuable lessons learned?

Exploring success stories in Central American MPAs

To begin to find answers, I spoke with Juan Carlos Villagran, a Guatemalan biologist with a wealth of experience in MPA management throughout Central America. He is currently Deputy Director of the Mexico and Northern Central America Conservation Program at The Nature Conservancy. (I'll be drawing from my discussion with him, as well as talks with other regional experts, through this brief series in MPA News.)

During the course of our conversation, Juan Carlos highlighted Belize as having several successful MPAs. In particular he noted three Belizean sites that stand out for their achievements in local leadership and stakeholder inclusion: Port of Honduras, Gladden Spit, and Glover's Reef. In his opinion, those areas exemplify good management activities while also including strong communal participation despite the many socioeconomic threats prevalent in their surrounding areas. With regard to the rest of Central America, Juan Carlos highlighted Cayos Cochinos in Honduras, Bahía de Jiquilisco in El Salvador, La Flor in Nicaragua, Isla Cocos in Costa Rica, and Isla Bastimentos in Bocas del Toro, Panama, as protected areas

that warrant recognition and discussion of what makes their management practices strong. Stay tuned for those insights.

We'll continue to look more in depth at some of the most successful marine and coastal protected areas throughout Central America. While there are others that have achieved relatively successful management strategies, historically most areas in the region have not achieved a high level of management success (i.e., have not met their goals). Why is this? What is happening within the hundreds of other protected areas in Central America that is preventing their success? In subsequent articles, we will begin to unpack some of the challenges and reflect on those lessons learned at both the national and broader regional scopes.

Read more about the protected area systems of each country with this Dos Mares storymap:

[¡Ahora Más Que Nunca Ellas Te Necesitan!](#) (Now More Than Ever They Need You!)

For more information:

Carlos Espinosa, Dos Mares. Email: cespinosa@dosmares.org

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