

May 23, 2011

Mr. Kishore Rao  
Director, World Heritage Centre  
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization  
7, place de Fontenoy  
75352 Paris 07 SP, France

Re: The Protected Area of Cabo Pulmo National Park, in Baja California Sur, Mexico

Dear Director Rao:

We, the undersigned members of the international scientific community, write regarding our concern for the integrity of the UNESCO World Heritage Site Cabo Pulmo (serial ID 1182-006), Baja California Sur - Mexico, which is threatened by large tourism and real estate developments. We respectfully request that you add the Cabo Pulmo issue to the agenda for the 35<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the World Heritage Committee in June, in order to discuss the protection of this unique place.

Cabo Pulmo is the northernmost coral reef in the eastern Pacific, and, at around 20,000 years old, it may be the oldest and most important reef in the American Pacific [1]. Cabo Pulmo has unique ecological processes, biological communities and physiographic characteristics [2]. Comprised of 25 different species of corals, the reef supports a rich diversity of species, including 154 species of marine invertebrates and 226 species of fish. Its inhabitants and visitors include humpback and Bryde's whales, tiger sharks, three types of dolphins, manta rays, marlins, tuna and five of the world's seven endangered species of sea turtles.

The preservation of Cabo Pulmo is a local, national, and international success story. After decades of intense fishing had depleted Cabo Pulmo's marine life, the local communities secured protected status for the reef from the government. In 1995, the State of Baja California Sur made Cabo Pulmo a Natural Protected Area; in 2000 Mexico dedicated it as a National Marine Park. In 2005, it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site as one of the "Islands and Protected Areas of the Gulf of California" (serial ID 1182). In 2008, Cabo Pulmo became a Ramsar International Wetlands Site.

After 15 years, the quality of life of local people has increased, and biomass and abundance of predator fish species has also increased. Aggregations of sea bass and groupers keep increasing year after year [3]. A comparative study of the reef fish community from 1987-2006 concluded that since the establishment of Cabo Pulmo National Park, top carnivore species increased in abundance and size, and in general it can be said that the fish fauna shows an excellent conservation status [4]. More importantly, in one decade, total biomass increased dramatically from 0.75 to 4.24 tons per hectare, a spectacular increase of 3.5 tons in each hectare of the protected area. In concordance with this pattern fish biomass has increased significantly in all trophic levels at annual rates varying between 12 and 25% [5].

However, Cabo Pulmo is now under serious threat. In March, Mexico's Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources approved key components of Cabo Cortés—one of several large tourism real estate projects that now threaten to harm Cabo Pulmo's coastal and marine life and the foundation of the local economy. The completed Cabo Cortés project would consist of 15 large hotels with over 30,000 hotel rooms, three to five golf courses, a 490-slip marina, desalination and water treatment plants, a private jet strip, and other infrastructure, adjacent to and directly north of Cabo Pulmo.

The influx of tourism and population growth of a project of this magnitude will bring overwhelming pollution and greater pressure on Cabo Pulmo's marine and coastal ecosystems. The vulnerability of corals to human activity and pollution is well-documented, as they are sensitive to changes in water quality, salinity, turbidity and temperature [6]. Sand dredging during construction of the marina and breakwater, fertilizers and chemicals used on the golf courses, discharge from the desalination and water treatment plants, and pollution from the marina's boats and increased human population would dramatically alter the area ecologically. Cabo Cortés's proposal also includes major infrastructure in sand dunes, which would damage the coastline and result in beach erosion of vital sea turtle nesting sites.

In our opinion, this development could cause irreversible harm to this unique and vulnerable reef and is inconsistent with its protected status. The need to act is urgent. We therefore request that the World Heritage Committee:

add Cabo Pulmo to the agenda for its 35<sup>th</sup> meeting in June,  
send an investigative mission to the area to research the potential damage large tourism projects could cause to Cabo Pulmo,  
place Cabo Pulmo to the List of World Heritage in Danger, and  
request that the Mexican government protect Cabo Pulmo by rejecting Cabo Cortés and other detrimental large resort proposals.

We thank you for considering our views.

Sincerely,

Dr. Exequiel Ezcurra  
UC-Mexus, University of California Riverside

Dr. Octavio Aburto-Oropeza  
Scripps Institution of Oceanography

Dr. Sylvia Earle  
Former NOAA Chief Scientist

Dr. Daniel Pauly  
Fisheries Centre, UBC

Dr. Enric Sala  
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Dr. Robert Warner  
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Dr. Mark Hixon  
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## Cited References

1. *Islands and Protected Areas of the Gulf of California Mexico, IUCN World Heritage Evaluation Report*; May 2005; “Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park,” page 57.
2. *Nomination for the Islands and Protected Areas of the Gulf of California, Mexico*; presented by the National Commission of Protected Natural Areas, Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources; 2005; pg 10.
3. Aburto, O. (2010). “Los beneficios de las reservas marinas,” *Biodiversitas*. 89: 2-6.
4. H. Reyes-Bonilla<sup>1\*</sup>, L. Alvarez-Filip. (2008). “Long-term changes in taxonomic distinctness and trophic structure of reef fishes at Cabo Pulmo reef, Gulf of California,” *Proceedings of the 11<sup>th</sup> International Coral Reef Symposium*, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, 7-11 July 2008. Session number 18: Pp. 790-794.
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