

A Background Primer

Largest locally managed fishery in Central America proposed around the Miskito Keys of Honduras

Contacts:

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*What do you get when you mix marine conservation, good science
and economic empowerment of local communities?
Hopefully, the creation of a 1.45 million hectare (3.6 million acre)
marine reserve in the Caribbean off of the Moskitia Coast of Honduras.*

Background:

Due to the all-too-common disabilities and deaths resulting from the practice of scuba diving lobster fishing, the governments of Belize, Costa Rica, EL Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama had agreed to ban the dangerous practice. This ban will be effective in Honduras at the end of the current season, February 2013.

With this impending ban, there is an economic precipice fast approaching for the nearly three thousand fishers employed in the lobster diving industry in La Moskitia, Honduras. Given that the lobster fishery is the economic mainstay of the region, the question for these communities is how to find new employment opportunities for these fishers.

A Local Solution

Enter Dr. Stephen Box, a marine biologist who has been working in Honduras for the past decade, but only recently started working in La Moskitia. Box and his colleagues at the Honduran-based Centre for Marine Ecology, Global Fish Alliance's Spiny Lobster Initiative and The Nature Conservancy looked to find a sustainable solution in success stories from elsewhere in the region. They settled on the locally managed, artisanal fisheries of Port Honduras, in southern Belize; a model that is economically successful, employs sustainable practices, yet had never had a scuba diving fishery.

In late April, a delegation comprised of Box, La Moskitia Governor Nora Trino Miranda, and members of the Miskito Active Divers Association traveled to Belize to learn about this model's best artisanal lobster harvest practices from their Belizean counterparts. Joining the delegation were a photographer and videographer from the International League of Conservation Photographers, who were on hand for much of the next five weeks to capture this unfolding story from its inception.

A Good Plan Based on Good Science

As a result of this meeting, Box and his team at the Centre for Marine Ecology decided to develop a similar fishery plan for the La Moskitia. Using marine data sets from NASA's Millennium Coral Reef Mapping Project, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission and the University of South Florida (among others), they determined optimal boundaries for an exclusive fishery in the remote keys offshore of La Moskitia.

The proposed fishery, home to lobster, snapper and conch, encompasses all 54 identified Keys in La Moskitia, some of which had never been charted. The area covers 1.45 million hectares (3.6 million acres). It includes more than 750 square kilometers (290 square miles) of coral reefs and related hard bottom habitats, which provides important cover and feeding areas for many fish and invertebrates. The area would also provide a safe haven for sharks, sea turtles and manatees, strengthening the protection of marine resources provided by Honduran President Porfirio 'Pepe' Lobo Sosa, who this past May reaffirmed his recent declaration of Honduran waters as a shark sanctuary.

Economic Empowerment

Designed specifically to promote the safe and sustainable use of marine resources, the fishery would employ artisanal practices. Industrial fishing operations would be prohibited. The plan would also provide important economic security for the residents and region of La Moskitia, by connecting these fishers to strong market chains. The initiative would facilitate education, scientific research and environmental monitoring in support of marine conservation. Maybe most important, the local residents would be invested in the management and conservation of the marine resource, thereby benefitting both the recovery of fisheries and the human community's long-term social, economic and environmental sustainability.

Steve Box summed up the value of a new La Moskitia-managed fishery when he said, "The creation of an exclusive use area, managed by artisanal fishers, to replace a dangerous and poorly regulated industrial fishery, provides a unique opportunity to fundamentally change the way in which marine resources are used and protected. With greater economic benefits going directly to local communities, there is a real incentive for fishers to implement sustainable practices and play a crucial part in conserving their marine environment into the future."