



Defending our Oceans
<http://oceans.greenpeace.org>

THE GULF OF CALIFORNIA: Tourism that kills

The Gulf of California, also known as the "World's Aquarium", receives around 2.1 million tourists every year. More than half of them are foreigners, mostly from the U.S. They generate revenue of nearly 2,000 million dollars. 68.8% of the tourists who visited Mexico from January to September 2006 were from the U.S., followed by tourists from Canada (8.7%), United Kingdom (3%) and Spain (2.6%).

Revenue from tourism contributes 7.8% of Mexico's GNP. However, this economic revenue comes at a cost to the country: pollution is dumped, the little fresh water available is consumed and new settlers generate additional pressure on tourist regions. Ecosystems of crucial importance such as mangroves are destroyed leave higher benefits (according to UNEP, mangroves between 200,000\$ and 900,000\$ of benefits by hectare every year) The current boom in tourism development means hotels, golf courses, harbours and malls in Baja California Peninsula have become a new threat to the World's Aquarium.

The growth of tourism development in the region is so fast and uncontrolled that the accommodation on offer grows at a rate 36% faster than the demand. The damage from uncontrolled development generates losses that are higher than the economic revenue brought by tourism. Therefore, it is essential that the tourist industry is brought under control and developed in an environmentally sustainable way.

Currently, there are four mega projects being developed in the region: Golden Beach, Loreto Bay, Puerto Peñasco, and Puerto Los Cabos.

Golden Beach is located in Loreto (Baja California South). Driven by investors from Arizona it covers an area of 3,458 hectares, where four five-star hotels, 2 golf courses, residential villas, a marina, a mall and restaurants are planned. Loreto Bay, which has Canadian investments, will hold 1,600 hotel rooms, 6,374 apartments, 4,571 houses, a golf course, boutiques, a marina, a spa, a sport fishing centre, several restaurants, a mall, facilities for cultural and leisure activities and an art gallery.

These developments could finish the fresh water available in the area. According to a study by Harvard University, the only aquifer that supplies Loreto could be

depleted within three years due to contamination by seawater. There is no possibility to gather underground fresh water in 60% of the territory of Baja California Sur, while in the rest of the territory the aquifers are at risk of collapse.

81% of the investment in the state of Sonora is in Puerto Peñasco, one of the driest regions of the continent. Tourism to this area mainly comes from Arizona. The planned construction of a marina would destroy a rocky reef that hosts more than 400 species of invertebrates. The U.S. company Sandy Beach Resorts, through Mexican investments, plans to destroy the La Choya marsh and a rocky reef where invertebrate species such as the scallops, sea cucumber and the mother of pearl. The region currently has 5,697 hotel rooms plus villas and residences.

The Puerto Los Cabos Project is already under construction. It has displaced a community known as La Playita; the plans will destroy 189.3 hectares of desert and an oasis representing the most important aquifer of the region to build a public market and facilities for ship supplying, a marina for 421 boats, two golf courses, 270 hectares for 1168 houses, three beach clubs, three large capacity hotels, two theme parks, a commercial area and a museum.

In Los Cabos, the fresh water deficit is nearly 30%. The local population of the harbour suffers from this shortage, which does not affect the hotel clients. The tourist project "Mar de Cortés" intends to build and extend developments throughout the Gulf of California. Within a desert area with constant water shortages, 14 new harbours are planned and the existing 9 ones are to be expanded. The project also includes plans to expand 20 airports and set up 12 golf courses. It is estimated that over 62,000 boats will arrive at this area every year from 2014 onwards. Discharges, spills, dredges and other physical alterations to marshes and bays for the construction and management of marinas, hotels and urban developments, will impact on the fishing productivity as well as on the marine and landscape richness, which are the main tourism attractions and the economic base of the region. A massive displacement of population may be provoked, as well as the overexploitation of the very limited fresh water and other natural resources of the region, already under stress.

Unlike traditional tourism that is built upon the convenience of hotels and beaches with large infrastructures, alternative tourism has a great potential in the Gulf of California and has grown recently. "Ecotourism" which involves small-scale interaction with the natural environment (such as observing whales, dolphins, sea lions and turtles, bird watching and sea kayaking) is more directly dependent on the preservation of the native species and habitats. The development of tourism which values the area and its wildlife, rather than eliminates it, has the potential to provide revenue to strengthen the organization of communities and generate sources of employment, gives an incentive to preserve natural resources, and can improve services and preserve community values within the region.

December 2006

oceans.greenpeace.org