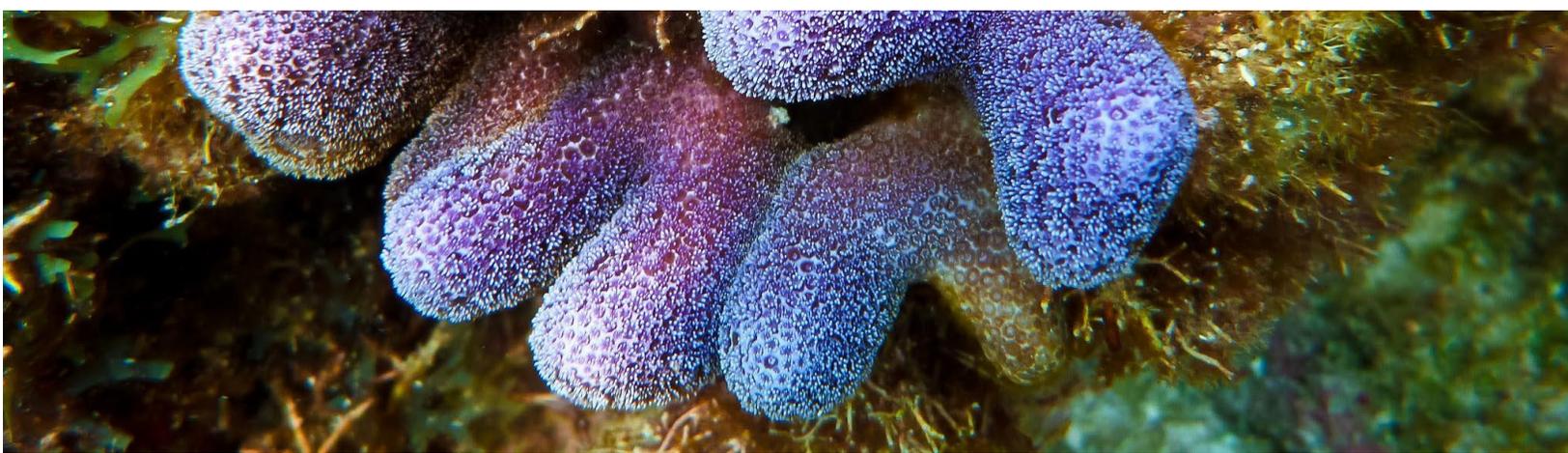


MESOAMERICAN REEF 2017 – A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

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The Mesoamerican Reef (MAR) region, which extends across the Caribbean coasts of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras is the largest transboundary reef system and one of the richest and most diverse ecosystems in the world. It is renowned for its diverse natural wonders as well as its rich cultural and ethnic diversity. It continues to face many threats to its health and that of the local communities and economies that depend on it. By effectively addressing these threats through a close alliance of government and civil society, it has the potential to set a global example of how societies can thrive sustainably alongside their environment.

The upcoming 20th anniversary of the Tulum Agreement in 2017 represents an opportunity to showcase current achievements in conservation and key challenges for the future, as well as to demonstrate how decision-makers and regulators can contribute to the critical task of aligning the MAR region's economies with its unique and precious marine resources.

When the heads of state of Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico signed the Tulum Agreement in 1997, they agreed to promote the conservation of the MAR through its sustainable use, thereby contributing to the welfare of present and future generations. Now is an appropriate time to take stock and plan for the continuing conservation of this globally important region, which contributes towards climate stability, food security, peoples' livelihoods and, critically, the countries' continued economic development. Policymakers, coastal resource managers, local communities and businesses alike face a unique challenge: how can they maximize the economic benefits derived from the renewable resources of the MAR to enhance the economic wellbeing of communities and the four nations, whilst simultaneously preserving its long term biological and economic value?

As the region continues to experience unprecedented changes along the coastlines and within the marine environment, including coastal pollution, fisheries decline, and increased vulnerability to climate change, we are looking to decisive leadership to help define a new path forward, away from

“business as usual” and towards a sustainable “Blue Economy” that can help safeguard the natural capital that, in turn, sustains the people of the Mesoamerican Reef region. A blue economy, as an expansion of the green economy concept, reflects the growing recognition that robust economies and sustainable growth are dependent on a healthy resource base.

We can proudly say that many significant conservation results have been achieved in the region since 1997.

The MAR now boasts a network of more than 65 coastal and marine protected areas, and almost all of them are under active management. Thirty-six percent of the territorial sea in the MAR is within protected areas, although only 3% is fully protected from fishing. In Belize, spawning aggregations are protected; reef-associated herbivorous fish are protected in Belize, Guatemala, and the Bay Islands of Honduras; a region-wide ban on shark finning has been implemented, and no-take protected areas acting as fish refuges are being created to recover ecosystems and commercial fisheries. The region has become a global leader in adaptive management and the active implementation of recommended management actions that are now starting to show ecological results.

These conservation mechanisms now actively involve local participation. Fishers are at the forefront of designating and enforcing fish refuges, in several cases participating in their design, management and monitoring. Local community groups are increasingly engaged in conservation and management activities, and protected area administrators collaborate with interested communities to develop sustainable alternate sources of income.

A number of long-term regional initiatives have been developed. One example is the MAR Fund, now an established funding mechanism for the region. It supports a network of MPAs, reef restoration and the establishment of fish refuges, among other strategic conservation and sustainable use initiatives. Since 2008, the Healthy Reefs for Healthy People Initiative (HRI) has produced biennial report cards, making science-based information on the status of the reef's health publicly available. In addition to measuring and analyzing a set of reef indicators, it also provides information on threats to the reef system, as well as important conservation and management results and recommendations. The MAR Alliance is shining a spotlight on the importance of conserving large marine species and WWF and the agricultural sector are achieving substantially reduced fertilizer, pesticide and sediment run off into the MAR. The Mesoamerican Reef Leadership Program (MAR-L) accelerates conservation in the MAR by strengthening the capacities and leadership skills of young conservationists in Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras to help them launch innovative conservation projects.

What is truly exciting about all these advances is that they are taking place across the four MAR countries and stakeholders across the region are communicating and exchanging better practices. Formal and informal networks are being created and are growing. The fact that these changes are occurring at the regional level is a crucial accomplishment as it reflects the ecological reality that the MAR is a single, shared, resource.

Although the advances over the past 20 years are substantial, more needs to be done to protect the MAR from continuing threats to the natural capital it embodies. Four threats stand out as the most critical impediments to the long-term ecological and economic viability of the Mesoamerican Reef:

- 1. The discharge of effluents and contaminants from human activities in the watersheds and marine*

areas directly impacts the MAR's coastal and marine habitats, affecting their capacity to provide important environmental goods and services such as fisheries and tourism-related activities, and to recover from other sources of stress such as climate change.

2. *Unsustainable coastal development* is impacting on marine and coastal habitats, particularly mangroves, which provide shoreline protection, water filtration and nursery habitat for many economically and ecologically important marine species. While coastal development has generated many employment opportunities, if it continues without more care for the environment, the appeal of the MAR's coast and marine resources will dwindle and along with it, the associated jobs. Environmentally sound coastal zone management plans and their effective implementation is essential in the four countries of the MAR.

3. *Chronic fishing pressure endangers ecosystem function in many places across the MAR.* Important steps have been taken to improve the sustainability of fishing activities including the creation of fish replenishment zones, better enforcement capacity, and harmonization of selected fisheries regulations across the region. However, years of overfishing have resulted in reductions or collapses of some fish, lobster and conch stocks. Illegal fishing and poor enforcement continues to be a problem. It is important to phase out unsustainable fishing gear, and promote good fishing and marketing practices, and continue to build the network of scientifically justified replenishment zones or no-take fish refuges in and around MPAs in a harmonized way across the MAR. These should focus on source or nursery habitats that provide ecological connectivity for commercially important species and provide measurable benefits to local fisheries to ensure economic prosperity for the fishers themselves.

4. *Climate change impacts on the reef* are taking a toll in multiple ways: ocean acidification (which occurs when oceans absorb CO₂ from the atmosphere) and elevated sea temperatures from global warming are bleaching corals and changing oceanographic dynamics as well as species behavior and larval settlement and juvenile movements. If the Mesoamerican reefs are going to endure, we need to build their resilience to a changing climate.

► OUR AIM is to build personal, corporate and societal responsibility towards our blue resources and to guarantee their effective protection and sustainable use as pillars of rural and urban development, and through this approach enable businesses and communities, large and small, to see sustainable returns on their investments. To the extent that this effort is undertaken in a participatory way, in which people living in small coastal communities and large coastal cities alike embrace the connection between a healthy reef and their own wellbeing, it will have a much greater chance of enduring over the long-term.

The MAR Fund, Healthy Reefs Initiative and MAR Leadership Program and their diverse partners in conservation have proven track records of designing and successfully implementing innovative solutions to marine resource management challenges, including science-based, decision making tools, collaborative marine resource monitoring, innovative solutions for marine spatial planning, and novel finance mechanisms to facilitate the restructuring of fisheries. We see a clear opportunity for Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico to collectively enhance their global leadership in resolving complex marine conservation problems and forging a pathway for businesses and communities to thrive under the emerging Blue Economy.

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