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¿Sabes cuántos granos de arena hay en una playa?



Without more protection, wetlands initiatives will bog down progress

November 15, 2004

The parties to the U.N. Ramsar Convention on Wetlands could hardly have chosen a more appropriate site for their 3rd Pan-American regional meeting than Merida, Yucatan. The conference this past week drew attention to the swampy ecosystems in the Caribbean peninsula and throughout Mexico that need so much more protection than they are receiving.



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As a waning source of natural beauty, tourist revenue, shelter from inclement weather and erosion, food supply, and biodiversity, the wetlands of the world were provided with a framework for national action and international cooperation by the intergovernmental Convention on Wetlands, signed in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971. Mexico is one of 141 contracting parties to the convention. The country has 51 of the 1,387 sites designated as Wetlands of International Importance. Just this February on International Wetlands Day, Mexican Environment and Natural Resources Secretary Alberto Cárdenas presided over a ceremony that named 34 of those sites, the largest number ever designated in a single day.

Together with the previously named Mexican sites, they cover more than 5 million hectares of ecosystems such as coral reefs, sea turtle beaches, endangered manatee habitat and high altitude lakes. The Yucatan Peninsula claims several of these sites, including the Rio Lagartos National Park and the Dzilam State Reserve, which was one of 15 places worldwide, including three in Latin America, that qualified for Ramsar Convention small grant funding approved last year.

The reserve's boundaries and fire lines are slated to be better defined with the money's application. Voluntary contributions to the Small Grants Fund were made by Austria's Ministry for Land and Forestry, Environment and Water Management; Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Sweden; and the U.S. Department of State, the U.S Department of Interior, and the U.S Fish & Wildlife Service. The peninsula also claims the first Ramsar site to receive money from the new International Corporate Wetlands Restoration Partnership.

In March, the partnership donated \$750,000 to conserve freshwater, marine and coastal resources in and around Mexico's Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, located just south of Cancun, Quintana Roo, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The funding is being used for conservation easements and promoting best practices for wastewater management, under the direction of Amigos de Sian Ka'an, the Mexican environmental organization implementing the project.

The financial backing is thanks to the United Nations Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, the Gillette Company, and a memorandum of understanding between the Coastal America Foundation and the Ramsar Convention Secretariat. Funding is a key issue in providing protection and sustainable development planning in Mexican wetlands.

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Besides the peninsular states of Yucatan, Quintana Roo and Campeche, other states with Ramsar sites that could benefit by it are Baja California Sur, Chiapas, Federal District, Guanajuato, Hidalgo, Jalisco, the State of Mexico, Michoacan, Nayarit, Oaxaca, Queretaro, Sinaloa, Sonora, Tamaulipas and Veracruz.

But funding is not the only issue that will determine wetlands conservation. Environmental organizations Greenpeace Mexico, the Mexican Environmental Law Center, and Bios Iguala chose the occasion of the regional Ramsar meeting to point out that rules and regulations also weigh in heavily. They said that wetlands in the state of Colima are on the verge of becoming the first victims of relaxed federal standards approved in May that will allow Manzanillo port expansion to destroy 75 hectares on the west coast. In this day and age, Mexico, especially as a party to the Ramsar Convention, should be making its standards more stringent, rather than relaxing them.

It also needs to elevate the status of its Ramsar sites to give all of them legal protections. Then these areas can hope to qualify for more funding to provide the enforcement measures that have always been lacking to date.

Talli Nauman is a founder and co-director of Journalism to Raise Environmental Awareness, a project initiated with support from the MacArthur Foundation. talli@direcway.com.

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