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Corporate and Environmentalist Alliance Buys Sensitive Coast Land in Mexican Nature Reserve

October 28, 2004 — By Mark Stevenson, Associated Press

MEXICO CITY — A newly formed international partnership for wetland restoration launched its first environmental protection effort this week donating US\$750,000 (euro585,000) to the purchase of a 1.1-mile (1.8 km) stretch of sensitive beach on Mexico's Caribbean coast.

The purchase by the International Corporate Wetlands Restoration Partnership (ICWRP) will help protect the entrance to a coastal lagoon system in Mexico's Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, an area of marshes, mangrove swamps, coral reefs, beaches, and jungle south of Tulum on Mexico's Yucatan peninsula.

"This is a significant moment in the life of one of the most important nature reserves in Mexico," said Alfredo Arellano, regional director for protected natural areas.

The purchase, which includes an environmental easement clause to keep the land undeveloped, will help protect the reserve against rapidly expanding tourist resorts and provide the first stretch of nonprivate beach in the northern part of the reserve, just a few miles south of the Maya ruins at Tulum.

"The main threat to the area is fishing and the enormous development of tourism" on the adjoining Riviera Maya, the stretch of coast between Cancun and Tulum, said Marco Lazcano, director of the nongovernmental group Amigos de Sian Ka'an, which arranged the purchase.

Contributing to the ICWRP purchase was The Nature Conservancy, which contributed US\$400,000 (euro312,000); the Gillette Company, with US\$100,000 (euro78,125); and the United Nations Foundation, which kicked in US\$250,000 (euro195,310).

"The ICWRP is a remarkable model of how best to bring the expertise and resources of local communities, responsible companies, and the international conservation community together," said Michael Madnick, vice president of the U.N. Foundation. The partnership has no immediate plans for similar purchases but said it will continue to look for new opportunities for such joint deals.

The property, once a sport-fishing club known as 'Pez Maya,' was bought from a government development bank which had foreclosed on it. The total purchase price — the remainder of which comes from the donors and other sources — is expected to be about US\$1.8 million (euro1.4 million).

The property includes the mouth of the reserve's lagoon system that empties into the sea. The lagoons, mangroves, freshwater sinkhole lakes, coastal marshes, and underground rivers serve as filters and as feeding and breeding grounds for the marine life of the coral reefs that hug the coast.

While Sian Ka'an — whose name in Maya means "The Place Where the Sky is Born" — is one of Mexico's best-preserved natural areas, experts say the size, delicacy, and importance of its wetlands system make protection a priority.



The newly acquired property is small: 64 acres (26 hectares) in comparison to the reserve's total of 1.6 million acres (666,660 hectares). But it is key because of its location near the reserve's northern limit and its function as a link between the sea and the lagoon.

Much of the reserve's coast is privately owned, and while there are strict, low-density zoning rules in place, officials acknowledge that such codes in Mexico often change and that perpetual protection was needed.

The reserve is open to low-impact tourism activities like swimming, canoeing, and animal watching via group tours offered by local Maya villages, but only about 40,000 people visit the reserve annually, compared to the millions that flock to the high-rise hotels of Cancun.

Source: Associated Press

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