



CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL POLICY CONFERENCE REPORT

TO PROTECT THE GULF OF MEXICO:

U.S. - CUBA COOPERATION ON MARINE CONSERVATION

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December 2007

On November first and second of 2007 fifteen of Cuba's top marine environmental scientists and managers met in Cancun, Mexico, with a like number of American counterparts, plus Vice Admiral Alberto Mariano Vazquez de la Cerda, of the Mexican Navy, who, along with the Center for International Policy, hosted the conference.

Cuban participants represented the Directorate of International Collaboration of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment (CITMA), the University of Havana, and the Ministry of Fisheries. The Cuban delegation was headed by Dr. Jorge Luis Fernandez Chamero of CITMA.

American participants represented the Harte Research Institute, Nature Conservancy, University of Miami, Florida International University, Tulane University, Mote Marine Laboratory and Environmental Defense. The U.S. delegation was headed by Dr. John (Wes) Tunnell of the Harte Institute. Also in attendance was Vice Admiral Alberto Vazquez de la Cerda, Ph.D., a specialist in physical oceanography who is a member of the advisory council of the Harte Institute.

The Harte Research Institute and the Mote Marine Laboratory are collaborating on ongoing projects with the Cubans in the Gulf of Mexico and in adjacent waters. However, beyond that, there has been virtually no coordination among U.S. conservation/research organizations doing work in Cuba. That will no longer be the case.



THE GULF OF MEXICO

The first order of business was to agree which projects should have priority. The second was to take steps to improve communications and coordination among the various groups and organizations involved – both Cuban and American.

For example, it is now almost impossible for Cubans to travel to the United States, and

it is often difficult, if not impossible, for them to have access to internet sites, such as Google, which block Cuban IP addresses.

The Cubans were prepared with a list of priorities – and presentations to back each one – and with a welcome willingness to work with their American colleagues to resolve problems. Both sides quickly reached an agreement on priorities.

2 CONFERENCE PRIORITIES

Coral Reef Research and Conservation.

Many of Cuba's coral reefs appear to be healthier than those elsewhere in the Caribbean, and for the most part, do not exhibit the widespread disease and mortality seen throughout the region, such as around the Florida Keys, Jamaica, and Mexico. There is great interest in better assessing the health of Cuba's reefs, along with biotic and abiotic factors and human impacts, to provide insights that could be helpful for coral reef conservation policies throughout the region.

Shark Research and Conservation.

Because of their slow growth rate, slow rate of reproduction, and the long period required for sexual maturity, elasmobranchs, including sharks, have proven especially vulnerable to fishing and other human impacts. Recent studies have indicated that there has been a decline of top predators, including sharks, of roughly 90 percent over the past 50 years. In the Gulf of Mexico, there has been a 99 percent reduction in oceanic white-tip sharks and 90 percent reduction in silky sharks since the 1950s. As many species of sharks are highly migratory, studying sharks in Cuban waters will help improve understanding of interconnections in the Gulf and Caribbean.

Sea Turtle Research and Conservation.

All seven species of sea turtles worldwide are considered endangered, due to a combination of overfishing and habitat destruction. A project led by the University of Havana (in partnership with the Harte Research Institute) is providing important information about the status of sea turtle populations in a region of the Gulf of

Mexico/Caribbean previously not well understood. Tagging and genetic studies are beginning to provide a better understanding of the connectivity of Cuban sea turtle populations with others in Mexico, the United States, and beyond, with important conservation implications. In addition, researchers are engaging local communities to reduce poaching and increase awareness.

Dolphin Research and Conservation.

Like sharks and sea turtles, the relationship of Cuba's dolphin population with others around the Gulf and Caribbean is poorly understood. Some research has been conducted by Cuba's National Aquarium, but greater integration with U.S. research will help provide a better regional picture.

Greater Attention to Conservation and Management of Fish Resources.

Cuba has not been immune from the impacts of overfishing seen elsewhere in the region, including stock depletion and adverse impacts on population dynamics in coral reef ecosystems. Ongoing research is helping to better characterize important nearshore fish assemblages and better inform fisheries management policies. In addition, ongoing ecotoxicological research is being conducted to

help assess the impact of land-based pollution on marine fish at an individual, community and ecosystem level. Such information is important in addressing land use policies and practices.

Strengthening and Extending the System of Protected Areas.

One of the most important, yet underutilized, conservation tools in the marine environment is the use of marine protected areas (MPAs), which serve to protect all



All participants expressed great satisfaction over the outcome of the conference. As one put it: “We now have a functioning bilateral organization, between Cubans and Americans no less, to advance together our agreed-upon priorities in protecting the marine environment. It is nothing short of historic.”

The next step will be a follow-up meeting in six months to include Mexican specialists and make the effort tri-national. While there has been considerable cooperation between Mexicans and Americans, and between Cubans and Americans, there has been little between Mexicans and Cubans. Vice Admiral Vazquez de la Cerda enthusiastically supported the idea of a new conference to include his countrymen.

Dr. Sylvia Earle, chair of the Harte Research Institute advisory council, suggested that the goal of the new organization should be to make the Gulf of Mexico a model for the protection of the marine environment. All conferees pledged to make it so!

components of the ecosystem and can be used not only to help ecosystems recover, but also to prevent problems from occurring in the first place. Cuba has already announced an ambitious program to designate 25 percent of its waters as protected areas. Experience elsewhere in design, management, enforcement and research will help Cuba establish its own network of protected areas. At the same time, the scientific community at large can benefit by assessing Cuba’s approach to the waters of the Gulf of Mexico and western Caribbean, discussion of tri- or multi-national coordination in establishing and managing protected area networks would benefit the entire region.

Conference participants agreed to redouble their efforts to support these priorities and to reach out to involve other organizations.

Cuban and American participants also agreed to take steps to improve communication and coordination. A list of e-mail addresses for all conferees and various other interested parties was pulled together and distributed to all participants. Responsible monitors from both sides



The Center for International Policy would like to thank the Ford Foundation for underwriting this conference, FONDEL, a Dutch company, for funding the Cuban participants. It also wishes to thank *South to North Communications* for its excellent interpreting services.

Conference Report

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